

Advice for patients with a calf injury

You have been treated in the Emergency Department for a calf injury, also known as a calf muscle strain. This leaflet gives advice on how to care for your injury at home.

How to look after your injured calf in the first 1-3 days

As with all sprains and strains, the key components of self-care in the first 24-48 hours are: rest, ice, pain relief (painkillers) and elevation (R.I.P.E.).

Rest

Rest as much as possible for the first 24 hours following your injury. Resting helps prevent further injury and allows the healing process to begin. In the first few days, reduce the amount of walking that you do and avoid strenuous activities such as running or jumping until you can walk without any pain.

Ice

Applying ice to the affected area helps to reduce the swelling, bleeding, and pain. Make an ice pack by wrapping a towel around a bag of frozen peas or crushed ice cubes. Place the ice pack against the area of injury for up to 20 minutes at a time, but no longer. This can be repeated every 2 hours. The ice pack can be re-used by refreezing but do not eat food that has been thawed and refrozen. Do not use ice if you have diabetes or circulation problems.

Pain relief

Calf injuries are very painful. They are characterised by a sudden pain, popping or tearing sensation behind the lower leg. It is advisable to take regular painkillers (e.g. paracetamol or ibuprofen) to reduce the pain and help keep you mobile. Paracetamol and ibuprofen can be bought from a local chemist, shop or supermarket. If these do not control your pain or if you are already taking other medicines from your doctor please consult a pharmacist.

Elevation

Keep your injured calf higher than your hips as much as possible during the first few days. This will reduce pain and swelling.

Exercises to be doing once the pain starts to improve

Once the calf feels less hot and painful, it is important to start gently exercising the injured muscle. This may be uncomfortable at first, but is essential to prevent tightness and

weakness and to encourage the natural healing process. The following exercises can be done sat down and should be performed slowly and thoroughly, moving into some discomfort but short of pain. They can be repeated 4 – 5 times per day.

Exercise 1

Move your foot up and down at the ankle stretching as far as possible in each direction. To start with you may find it easier to do this with your knee bent. As soon as you are able, do the exercise with the knee straight to increase the stretch. Repeat 10 times.

Exercise 2

Slowly move the foot and ankle in as large a circle as possible. This can be done in both clockwise and anticlockwise directions. Repeat 10 times.

Walking and later exercises

As soon as you are able to put weight through the injured leg, start to get up and about more. Short walks are good for the healing muscle, but avoid long distances and standing for long periods. You may find it more comfortable in shoes with a thicker or higher heel to start with, as this will lessen the stretch on the calf. Many people walk with their foot turned outwards and in front of them, but this should improve as each day goes by. Try to stop using your crutches as soon as possible but please remember to return them to the Emergency Department.

The following exercises are helpful in getting full stretch and strength back in the healing muscle. Some discomfort during exercise is acceptable, but never push through pain. The exercises can be repeated 3 – 4 times daily.

Exercise 3 (Calf stretch)

Stand facing a wall. Place your hands on the wall at shoulder height and width and lean into the wall. With feet facing forward, place the injured leg behind with the heel to the floor and the knee straight. Stretch to the point of discomfort or tightness and hold for 15 seconds, repeat 4 times. Compare the stretch with your uninjured leg; they should eventually be the same.



Exercise 4 (Calf raises – strengthening exercise)

Leave this exercise for at least a week or until you can stand comfortably. Ensure you have a firm surface to hold on to. Stand with your feet shoulder width apart and rise up onto your toes, taking as much weight as you need to through your hands. Hold for up to 5 seconds and then lower yourself back down. Repeat as many times as you feel reasonable (until your calf muscles feel tired). As the exercise gets easier over a few days, reduce the

support through your hands. Eventually you should be able to do the exercise on the injured leg alone. Test your good leg to see the maximum number of repetitions you can do. Work towards the same number on the injured leg.

It is important to continue exercises 3 & 4 until there is no difference between your two legs, to reduce the chance of a repeat injury. For the first two weeks following injury avoid excessive discomfort during activity. Exercise such as cycling, swimming and walking are good for the healing muscle. However do not return to any form of running sports until the calf has regained full stretch and strength. You may be aware of tightness in the muscle after prolonged inactivity or first thing in the morning. This will gradually settle.

Recovery

Depending on how severely your calf is injured, it may take up to 8 weeks to return to normal.

If you are unable to move your ankle freely and without pain you should not drive.

Before returning to sport, ensure that your calf is pain-free, strong and supple. Remember to warm up gently prior to sporting activities to prevent further injury (exercises 3 & 4 above can be used for this purpose).

Things to look out for

If you develop new symptoms that concern you or if you are unable to weight bear without severe pain after a week, see your GP or a physiotherapist or return to the Emergency Department.

Occasionally someone with a leg injury can develop a deep vein thrombosis (blood clot in the veins). If you notice that the pain and swelling are continuing to worsen beyond about 5-7 days after your injury, you should see your GP or return to the Emergency Department for further assessment.

For further information or advice, please speak with the doctors and nurses looking after you. For more information contact:

- Emergency Department 01535 294481
- NHS 111 111, or 111.nhs.uk
- The NHS website www.nhs.uk

