

PATIENT INFORMATION · MUSCULOSKELETAL

Soft tissue injury

sprains, strains and how they heal

A soft tissue injury is damage to a muscle, tendon or ligament rather than to bone. Swelling, bruising and pain are all part of healing. What speeds recovery is protecting the area early, then getting it moving again sooner than most people expect.

Get it looked at urgently if

- you **cannot put any weight on it**, or cannot take more than a few steps;
- the limb or joint **looks bent, twisted or out of shape**;
- the area is **numb, tingling, cold, pale or blue**;
- you **heard or felt a snap or pop** at the moment of injury and it swelled immediately;
- you cannot move the joint at all, or the pain is severe and not helped by painkillers;
- the skin over the injury is broken, or the injury happened at speed or from a height.

Any of these may mean a fracture or a complete tear and needs examining, usually with an X-ray or scan. We offer same-day appointments and on-site imaging. In an emergency, call 999 or go to the Royal London Hospital Emergency Department, Whitechapel Road, London E1 1FR.

What to expect

Most soft tissue injuries settle over one to six weeks. How long depends on which tissue was damaged, how badly, your age and your general health. Swelling that comes on within the first day, bruising that appears a day or two later and tracks downwards with gravity, and muscle spasm around the area are all normal.

Mild

1–2 days of taking it easy, then gradually back to normal

Moderate

3–5 days before comfortable movement returns

Severe

a week or more, and worth having reviewed

The first 72 hours

The aim early on is to limit bleeding and swelling into the tissues without letting the area stiffen up.

- **Protect.** Avoid movements that provoke sharp pain. Use crutches, a splint or a sling only if you have been given one and only for as long as advised.

- **Move early and gently.** Complete rest for more than a day or two weakens muscle and thickens scar tissue. Small, pain-free movements several times a day are better than staying still.
- **Ice for comfort.** Wrap an ice pack or a bag of frozen peas in a damp towel and hold it on for 10 to 20 minutes, repeating every two to three hours for the first day or so. Never put ice straight onto skin, and check the skin regularly. Do not use ice if you have poor circulation or reduced sensation in the area.
- **Elevate.** Support the injured part above the level of your heart where you can — a lower limb raised on cushions, an upper limb on a pillow across your chest.
- **Compression is optional.** A support bandage can feel comforting, but there is little evidence it speeds healing. If you use one, it should never be tight enough to cause throbbing, numbness or colour change.

What to avoid in the first 72 hours — **HARM**

H Heat	Hot baths, saunas, heat packs and heat rubs all increase blood flow and swelling.
A Alcohol	Increases swelling and bleeding, and dulls the pain that would otherwise stop you overdoing it.
R Re-injury	Going back to sport or heavy work too early is the commonest reason a simple sprain drags on for months.
M Massage	Vigorous massage directly over the injury aggravates the damaged tissue early on. It has its place later.

Pain relief

Paracetamol at the dose on the packet is usually enough. Anti-inflammatory medicines such as ibuprofen, taken by mouth or rubbed on as a gel, can help once the first couple of days have passed.

Anti-inflammatories do not suit everyone. Check with a pharmacist or with us first if you have asthma, stomach ulcers or indigestion, kidney problems, high blood pressure, or if you take blood thinners or other regular medicines.

Getting moving again

- Start gentle movement and stretching as soon as you can do it without sharp pain — usually within the first few days.
- **Mild discomfort during and after exercise is expected and is not damaging.** Pain that is sharp, or that leaves the area more swollen the next morning, means you have gone too far too soon.
- Build up in small steps: range of movement first, then strength, then speed and direction changes if you play sport.
- Do not go back to full sport until you can move the joint freely, take full weight on it, and trust it.

Not improving after two weeks, or the joint feels unstable? Book an appointment. Our physiotherapy and orthopaedic teams can assess the injury, perform ultrasound on site and arrange MRI through our imaging partners if needed, and set you up with a rehabilitation plan.

Seen today, not next week

Same-day appointments most days, seven days a week, 9am–7pm, on Whitechapel Road.

Book an appointment

or call 020 7916 0029

Where to get help

Tower Bridge Hospital London

97–99 Whitechapel Road, London E1 1DT

020 7916 0029

WhatsApp **07903 284 189**

info@mhwclinic.co.uk

Open 7 days, 9am–7pm

towerbridgehospital.co.uk

In an emergency

Call 999, or go to the Royal London Hospital Emergency Department, Whitechapel Road, London E1 1FR.

When we are closed and it is not an emergency

Call NHS 111 or visit 111.nhs.uk.

Also able to advise

Your own GP · Your local pharmacist

Related: [Physiotherapy](#) · [Orthopaedics](#) · [Ultrasound](#) · [All patient leaflets](#)

Written and reviewed by Dr H Bolat, GP & Clinical Director

Review date: 26 July 2026

Next review due: July 2028

Ref: TBH-PIL-016

This leaflet is based on current NHS and NICE guidance on the management of sprains and strains. It is general information and does not replace advice from a clinician who has examined your injury. If your symptoms change or you are worried, contact us on 020 7916 0029, call NHS 111, or call 999 in an emergency.

© 2026 My Health & Wellbeing Clinics Ltd, trading as Tower Bridge Hospital London. Company No. 14811638 · CQC Provider ID 1-17189808454 · Registered office: 97–99 Whitechapel Road, London E1 1DT.