

Are you in INJURY TIME?

Don't let sprains and strains slow you down. Patsy Westcott discovers the best ways to treat soft tissue injuries

A twisted ankle, swollen knee, stiff shoulder, strained wrist or sore elbow. These and other soft tissue injuries – affecting muscles, ligaments or tendons, can happen in a flash and not just as a result of sport. Maybe a trip on a step, rolling over on your ankle while walking, twisting awkwardly or just lifting a heavy bag into an overhead locker on a plane.

The good news is, most soft tissue injuries clear up within a relatively short time without medical help. But there are things you can do to ease pain and swelling and get back on your feet super quick.

OUR EXPERTS

► **Nick Harris**, orthopaedic surgeon and sports injury specialist, Spire Leeds Hospital

► **Sammy Margo**, physiotherapist, north London

► **John Miles**, sports physiotherapist, Cardiff Blues rugby team

► **Oliver Pearce**, orthopaedic surgeon, Professor of Institute of Sports and Activity Related Research, University of Bedfordshire and member of the Talking Knees Panel (talkingknees.co.uk)



Frozen shoulder (*adhesive capsulitis*)

► **What is it?** Pain, stiffness and aching in the shoulder that can cause difficulties with everyday activities such as brushing your teeth or dressing. The culprit is inflammation and thickening of the soft tissue around the shoulder – and women are especially at risk.

► **Treat it** "While most cases get better without treatment it can take a long time," says Sammy

Margo. Follow the first-aid tips in the Act fast panel (opposite) and avoid movements that make pain worse. If symptoms persist, see your GP, who can arrange a scan and, if necessary, refer you to a specialist for further treatments such as steroid injections. Gentle stretching exercises can help – seek the advice of a physiotherapist to avoid doing them incorrectly. You may need to wear a shoulder support.

Tennis elbow (*lateral epicondylitis*)

► **What is it?** Elbow pain – often most noticeable when you turn a door handle or open a jar – caused by damage to tendons on the outside of the elbow. It isn't just caused by tennis: any repetitive activity can bring on an attack, as can things such as carrying luggage, gardening and DIY. Golf elbow, affecting the tendons on the inner side

of the elbow, is less common and can be brought on by painting, computer use, gardening, chopping or climbing.

► **Treat it** Apply first aid (see Act Fast panel, opposite). An elbow support may help but if pain persists the GP may refer you to a specialist for steroid injections or as a last resort, surgery.

KNEES... SNAP, CRACKLE, POP

Often triggered by everyday activities such as lifting boxes, going up stairs or gardening, around three in five women aged 50+ have painful knees. Why? The way the female body is built imposes a greater strain on knees, say experts. Each type of knee problem can cause different symptoms. Check out the key culprits:



cartilage or ligament tear (the pop is likely to be accompanied by pain, inflammation and swelling). **Try this** If you suspect you may have torn a cartilage or ligament see the GP.

CRACKING, PAIN AND SWELLING IN THE KNEECAP

It could be Kneecap (patellar) injury or osteoarthritis.

Try this Apply first aid (see panel, right) and avoid anything that aggravates pain. If pain persists see the GP or a physio who may suggest exercises to strengthen the surrounding muscles and stretches to release tight muscles and tendons.

A POP

It could be Anything from soft tissue catching or air bubbles in the joint (synovial) fluid bursting, both of which are harmless, to, more seriously, a

A DULL ACHE OR SHARP, SHOOTING PAIN AND SWELLING

It could be What is known as a meniscal tear to the buffering cartilage that cushions the knee joints.

Try this Ice the knee and take a painkiller. If pain persists see the GP or try physio to strengthen and stretch legs. A treatment called AposTherapy® is a new non-drug treatment that entails special trainers designed to correct gait that puts strain on joints (apostherapy.co.uk). It's expensive at £2,400 but covered by some insurance companies and AposTherapy say that they are in discussion with certain NHS trusts about future provision.

Is it a sprain or a strain?

✦ **SPRAINS** happen when ligaments, the elastic bands of fibrous tissue that hold bones together, get overstretched, twisted or torn.

Symptoms Pain, tenderness, swelling, bruising and restricted movement.

Where Knees, ankles, wrists and thumbs.

✦ **STRAINS** aka pulled muscles – are caused by stretching or tearing of muscles.

Symptoms Muscle pain, spasm, weakness, inflammation and/or cramping are symptoms.

Where Lower back and hamstrings (back of your thighs), calves and other leg muscles.

HOW LONG TO HEAL?

There's no one size fits all: it depends on the tissue involved, how severe it is, your age and other factors, but this is a rough guide:

MUSCLES AND LIGAMENTS	TENDONS
Two to three weeks for mild strains and sprains; up to six weeks for more extensive tissue damage, up to three months for ruptured muscle or ligament.	Tendons can be slow to repair – expect two to three months for initial recovery and three to six months for full recovery.

Act fast



Follow these general principles when you first sustain a soft tissue injury:

✦ **ICE IT** for 15-20 minutes every two or three hours. Use a cold pack, bag of frozen peas or ice pack wrapped in a towel, or a product such as Deep Freeze Pain Relief Cold Patch, Gel or Spray (deepfreeze.co.uk/products).

✦ **ELEVATE IT** by placing the injured part on a pillow or other support higher than your heart to reduce swelling.

✦ **AVOID** hot baths, saunas, heat packs, alcohol – they can increase swelling – or anything that could increase the risk of further damage for the first two or three days.

✦ **REST MODERATELY** – while rest is vital for healing, the latest advice is to continue light activity such as walking, gentle stretching and mobilising the area to keep circulation flowing and prevent the affected part seizing up.

✦ **GIVE IT TIME** for most soft tissue injuries to settle – around seven to ten days – although they can take far longer to fully heal. If you're in severe pain after a week or an injury is significantly interfering with your life, see your GP, who can decide if you need a scan or refer you on for further treatment.

✦ **PHYSIO CAN HELP RECOVERY** so ask your GP to refer you or you can go private. Expect to pay from around £50-£70 per half hour depending on where you live.

WHAT ABOUT COMPRESSION?

Contrary to popular wisdom, the latest research suggests healing is just as fast without compression. But if it feels more comfortable to use an elasticated compression bandage it won't do any harm.

✦ **TREAT PAIN** with simple over-the-counter painkillers and anti-inflammatories such as ibuprofen or paracetamol. **w&h**

