

Argus Orthopaedic Zone

Let's See Now, Is it a Sprain or Strain?

By Thomas J. Haverbush, M.D.
Orthopaedic Surgeon

Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

Most people if you ask them do not have a clue about this. They have a vague notion that the terms are different, but are not sure how.

Since my job is to teach (hope you have noticed!) I will try to give you something to remember, so you can confidently talk about both conditions.

When you are about to call something a **SPRAIN**, think of a puffy, swollen ankle. Ouch! Ankle has only ligaments. No one calls it a "strained" ankle. Get it - ankle, ligaments, sprain.

STRAIN therefore must always refer to muscles. It does! Good for you.

SPRAIN

A sprain is the result of a specific trauma such as tripping and falling on an irregular surface. They are difficult to prevent because they happen so fast and unexpectedly usually to the ankle and knee.

STRAIN

Strains are all about muscles. They are related to overuse of a muscle. So they are preventable with a good exercise program that keeps muscles strong and flexible. Strains affect large muscle groups like the back, the calf or the hamstrings.

What to do. Treatment is basically the same.

When sprain or strain occurs, the affected area should be iced as soon as possible. Ice is O.K. not heat, please. Four or more times per day for twenty minutes each time. In older patients these injuries should be seen in a medical office because older patients have other conditions that may affect healing.

Over the counter anti-inflammatory medication is often used if you're not on a blood thinner.

Then there's "relative" rest. You don't have to go to bed or be on the couch for three days, because the part will stiffen up. Rest the injured area, but avoid allowing it to be completely inactive. You should in a day or so begin to do gentle stretching exercise around the joint. Of course the patient can do these exercises at home.

Compress the injured area with an elastic bandage if possible.

Elevate if possible, the injured area above the level of your heart. A pillow(s) usually works fine.

Rehabilitation usually takes a few days to see some results. If you feel you are improving nicely you may be able to do it all on your own. If in any doubt, get medical advice which often will involve a physical therapist. They are the best persons on the health care team to get you better after a serious sprain or strain.

Time to complete healing can vary for an injured muscle group or ligaments and can take up to four to six weeks. Some can take shorter or longer than that to heal depending on the severity, area of injury, your age and the effectiveness of rehabilitation.

If in any doubt get medical advice. Good luck.

Office Website and Argus Orthopaedic Archive

I hope what you have read has raised questions. No problem!

Please log onto www.orthopodsurgeon.com. It has a huge amount of musculoskeletal information in the Website and the Archive of all previous Argus articles.

Check it out and be amazed what you can learn.

Good health. Good life. All the best to you. Be well.

Dr. Haverbush