

Information Sheet

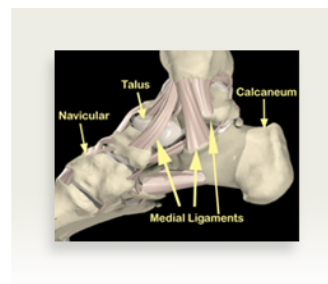
ANKLE SPRAINS

What is an ankle sprain?

An ankle sprain occurs when the ligaments of the ankle are stretched or, in the most severe cases, torn. The ligaments of the ankle are divided into two groups – those on the inner side (the medial ligaments) and those on the outside (the lateral ligaments). It is the lateral ligaments that are far more commonly injured (see pictures, below)



Lateral ankle ligaments



Medial ankle ligaments

How does an ankle sprain occur?

An injury to the ankle ligaments occurs as a result of a twisting injury to the ankle. The ligaments can either be stretched or torn, or occasionally pull away from the bone with a small fragment of bone attached to them. If the force of the injury is significant, then this may also cause the bones to fracture, or for the ankle joint to dislocate. In the most severe injuries, other structures can be injured. These include the cartilage lining of the joint (an osteochondral injury), the tendons around the outside of the ankle known as the peroneal tendons, or the nerves around the front and side of the ankle. There is usually bruising and swelling on the outside of the ankle, which can take a couple of weeks to settle (see picture, right).



How is an ankle sprain treated?

The majority of patients that suffer ankle sprains can be treated very successfully without surgery. The mainstay of treatment is extensive physiotherapy and rehabilitation of tendons and ligaments around the ankle. 80 – 90% of patients that suffer an ankle sprain can be treated in this way. At the Dorset Foot and Ankle Clinic, we work closely with highly skilled groups of physiotherapists, and will be happy to recommend one to you (see links section).

What if my symptoms fail to settle with physiotherapy?

If within three to six months the symptoms have not settled, then we would suggest seeking medical advice. Symptoms after an ankle sprain can generally be divided into instability problems or pain problems. Instability, or a feeling of “giving way” of the ankle, often occurs as a result of injury to the ligaments. If the ligaments either fail to heal, or heal elongated, this can cause a feeling of instability or giving way of the ankle and is often symptomatic when walking on uneven ground. Pain that persists after an ankle sprain can be due to a number of things. The most common causes include osteochondral lesions (injury to the cartilage and bone of the ankle joint), peroneal tendon tears, on-going inflammation in the ankle (known as synovitis), injury to the nerves and other rarer causes of ankle pain.

What is the treatment of instability after an ankle sprain?

If, despite extensive physiotherapy, symptoms have failed to settle then it may be appropriate to consider surgical stabilisation of the ankle joint. This involves a repair of the ligaments, known as a modified Brostrum procedure, which may be reinforced with one of the tendons on the outside of the ankle (a Watson-Jones procedure)

What is the treatment of ongoing pain after an ankle sprain?

Treatment of pain will depend on the cause. Often, patients with chronic pain after ankle sprain are investigated with an MRI scan. This excellent investigation allows a very accurate assessment of the ankle joint and surrounding structures to be made and any possible injuries of the ankle to be identified. If inflammation or damage to the cartilage has been identified then it may be appropriate to consider keyhole surgery to settle things. This procedure is known as arthroscopy.