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Muscle Strain

KEY POINTS

- A muscle strain is a stretch or tear of a muscle. This type of injury is often called a pulled muscle.
- Change or stop doing the activities that cause pain until the injury heals.
- Strains can be treated with moist heat, ice, medicine, and sometimes physical therapy.

What is a muscle strain?

A muscle strain is a stretch or tear of a muscle. This type of injury is often called a pulled muscle.

What is the cause?

The usual cause of muscle strain is tightening of a muscle during an activity. It might happen, for example, when you run, jump, throw, or lift a heavy object.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- A snapping or popping sound at the time of the injury
- Pain or burning in the injured area
- Trouble using the injured muscle
- Swelling or bruising in the injured area

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms, activities, and medical history and examine you.

How is it treated?

You will need to change or stop doing the activities that cause pain until your muscle or tendon has healed. For example, you may need to try swimming or biking instead of running.

Depending on the injury, you may be given crutches, a brace, or a sling.

Your healthcare provider may recommend stretching and strengthening exercises. You may need physical therapy.

Your healthcare provider or physical therapist may tape the injured muscle while it heals to help you return to athletic activities. Taping helps reduce movement that may cause more muscle damage.

A mild strain may heal within a few weeks. A more severe strain may take 6 weeks or longer.

How can I take care of myself?

To help relieve swelling and pain:

- Put an ice pack, gel pack, or package of frozen vegetables wrapped in a cloth on the sore area every 3 to 4 hours for up to 20 minutes at a time.
- Do ice massage. To do this, freeze water in a paper cup, then peel the top of the cup away to expose the ice. Hold the bottom of the cup and rub the ice over the painful area for 5 to 10 minutes. Do this several times a day while you have pain.
- Wrap an elastic bandage around your strained muscle for support and to help treat or prevent swelling
- If possible, keep the injured muscle up on pillows so that it is above the level of your heart when you sit or lie down.
- Take nonprescription pain medicine, such as acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or naproxen. Read the label and take as directed. Unless recommended by your healthcare provider, you should not take these medicines for more than 10 days.
 - Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, naproxen, and aspirin, may cause stomach bleeding and other problems. These risks increase with age.
 - Acetaminophen may cause liver damage or other problems. Unless recommended by your provider, don't take more than 3000 milligrams (mg) in 24 hours. To make sure you don't take too much, check other medicines you take to see if they also contain acetaminophen. Ask your provider if you need to avoid drinking alcohol while taking this medicine.
- Put moist heat on the sore area for 10 to 15 minutes before you do warm-up and stretching exercises. Moist heat may help relax your muscles. Moist heat includes heat patches or moist heating pads that you can buy at most drugstores, a warm wet washcloth, or a hot shower. To prevent burns to your skin, follow directions on the package and do not lie on any type of hot pad. Don't use heat if you have swelling.

Use an elastic bandage when you return to your activities as directed by your provider.

Follow your healthcare provider's instructions, including any exercises recommended by your provider. Ask your provider:

- How long it will take to recover
- If there are activities you should avoid and when you can return to normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup. Keep all appointments for provider visits or tests.

How can I help prevent a muscle strain?

Warm-up exercises and stretching before activities can help prevent injuries. The stronger and more flexible your muscles are, the less likely it is that they will be strained.

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