

Lateral Ankle Sprains

The ankle joint is the articulation of 3 bones – the tibia (shin bone), the fibula and the talus. It is stabilised on the lateral (outside) by 3 ligaments, the anterior talofibular ligament (ATFL), the calcaneofibular ligament (CFL) and the posterior talofibular ligament (PTFL).



The lateral ligaments are the most commonly damaged ligaments in the body, and are generally injured when the foot rolls forwards and inwards. Ankle sprains are classified based on how many ligaments have been damaged. As a general rule, the ATFL is the first ligament to be damaged, and a more serious injury will also involve the CFL and rarely the PTFL. Regardless of severity, an ankle sprain should initially be treated by the RICE principle (Rest Ice Compression Elevation). Often an x-ray will be taken to rule out the possibility of a fracture around the ankle, and this will sometimes reveal an avulsion fracture, which is where the ligament has been pulled off the bone at its attachment rather than tearing. These injuries are treated the same as a tear of the ligament itself and generally heal well.

Once a fracture has been ruled out, it is important to start mobilising the ankle to prevent it from becoming stiff and help remove swelling from the ankle. Physiotherapy aims to get you walking normally as quickly as possible through joint mobilisations, massage and exercises. From walking, exercises to retrain balance control and a gradual return to running and then sport is commenced.

Most ankle sprains will settle within 6 weeks. In approximately 5% of cases, there is persistent swelling, pain or loss of movement after this time. In this case it is important to assess for damage inside the ankle joint itself. This can range from a synovitis (an irritation of the lining of the joint capsule) through to osteochondral lesions (damage to the cartilage lining the joint surfaces). If this is suspected, further investigations such as an MRI may be arranged to give a definitive picture of the pathology.