

# The Seven Most Common Sports Injuries



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What weekend warriors need to know about preventing and treating the seven most common sports injuries

. The seven most common sports injuries are:

1. Ankle sprain
2. Groin pull
3. Hamstring strain
4. Shin splints
5. Knee injury: ACL tear
6. Knee injury: Patellofemoral syndrome — injury resulting from the repetitive movement of your kneecap against your thigh bone
7. Tennis elbow (epicondylitis)

To see how to prevent and treat these common sports injuries — and to learn when it's time to look further than your medicine cabinet to treat sports injuries— read on.

The most common sports injuries are strains and sprains

Sprains are injuries to ligaments, the tough bands connecting bones in a joint. Suddenly stretching ligaments past their limits deforms or tears them. Strains are injuries to muscle fibers or tendons, which anchor muscles to bones. Strains are called “pulled muscles” for a reason: Over-stretching or overusing a muscle causes tears in the muscle fibers or tendons.

“Think of ligaments and muscle-tendon units like springs,” says William Roberts, MD, sports medicine physician at the University of Minnesota and spokesman for the American College of Sports Medicine. “The tissue lengthens with stress and returns to its normal length — unless it is pulled too far out of its normal range.”

## Preventing the most common sports injuries

Sometimes preventing common sports injuries is beyond our control, but many times sports injuries are preventable. “Some injuries,” Roberts says, “we bring on ourselves because we're not conditioned for the activity.” His advice: “Work out daily and get double benefit — enjoy your weekend activities and garner the health benefits.”

Every workout should start with a gentle warm-up to prevent common sports injuries, ty. Getting warmed up increases blood flow to the muscles, gets you more flexible, and could decrease injuries.

Overuse injuries are common and preventable. Don't come out and hit the ball for an hour after not playing for a while. Whether it's hiking, running, or team sports, do some “pre-participation training” first by lightly working the relevant muscle groups in the weeks before the activity.

And learn to recognize when you've already left it all on the field. Stop when you are fatigued. Muscle fatigue takes away all your protective mechanisms and really increases your risk of all injuries. You can always come out to play again next weekend — if you don't get injured today.

## Treating the most common sports injuries

Usually, common sports injuries are mild or moderate — there's some damage, but everything is still in place. You can treat them at home using the PRICE therapy method described later in this article. But you should expect that some common sports injuries may take months to heal, even with good treatment. If a sprain or strain is severe, however, the entire muscle, tendon, or ligament is torn away, and surgery may be needed.

Here are some specific tips for treating each of the most common sports injuries:

### 1. Ankle sprain

**What it is:** Most athletes have experienced a sprained ankle, which typically occurs when the foot turns inward. This turning stretches or tears the ligaments on the outside of the ankle, which are relatively weak.

**What you can do:** With an ankle sprain, it's important to exercise to prevent loss of flexibility and strength — and re-injury. You can ask your doctor or physical therapist to help you know what kinds of exercise you should do.

**When to see a doctor:** It's important to note where the sprain has occurred. A 'high ankle sprain' is slower to heal and should probably be seen by a doctor to make sure the bones in the lower leg did not separate. One way to recognize a high ankle sprain is that this sprain usually causes tenderness above the ankle.

## 2. Groin pull

**What it is:** Pushing off in a side-to-side motion causes strain of the inner thigh muscles, or groin. Hockey, soccer, football, and baseball are common sports with groin injuries.

**What you can do:** Compression, ice, and rest will heal most groin injuries. Returning to full activity too quickly can aggravate a groin pull or turn it into a long-term problem.

**When to see a doctor:** Any groin pull that has significant swelling should be seen early by a physician.

## 3. Hamstring strain

**What it is:** Three muscles in the back of the thigh form the hamstring. The hamstring can be over-stretched by movements such as hurdling — kicking the leg out sharply when running. Falling forward while waterskiing is another common cause of hamstring strains.

**What you can do:** Hamstring injuries are slow to heal because of the constant stress applied to the injured tissue from walking. Complete healing can take six to 12 months. Re-injuries are common because it's hard for many guys to stay inactive for that long.

## 4. Shin splints

**What they are:** Pains down the front of the lower legs are commonly called “shin splints.” They are most often brought on by running — especially when starting a more strenuous training program like long runs on paved roads.

**What you can do:** Rest, ice, and over-the-counter pain medicine are the mainstays of treatment.

**When to see a doctor:** The pain of shin splints is rarely an actual stress fracture — a small break in the shin bone. But you should see your doctor if the pain persists, even with rest. Stress fractures require prolonged rest, commonly a month or more to heal.

## 5. Knee injury: ACL tear

**What it is:** The anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) holds the leg bone to the knee. Sudden “cuts” or stops or getting hit from the side can strain or tear the ACL. A complete tear can make the dreaded “pop” sound.

**When to see a doctor:** Always, if you suspect an ACL injury. ACL tears are potentially the most severe of the common sports injuries. A completely torn ACL will usually require surgery in individuals who wish to remain physically active.

## 6: Knee injury: Patellofemoral syndrome

**What it is:** Patellofemoral syndrome can result from the repetitive movement of your kneecap (patella) against your thigh bone (femur), which can damage the tissue under the kneecap. Running, volleyball, and basketball commonly set it off. One knee or both can be affected.

**What you can do:** Patience is key. Patellofemoral pain can take up to six weeks to clear up. It's important to continue low-impact exercise during this time. Working out the quadriceps can also relieve pain.

## 7. Tennis elbow (epicondylitis)

**What it is:** Repetitive use of the elbow — for example, during golf or tennis swings — can irritate or make tiny tears in the elbow's tendons. Epicondylitis is most common in 30- to 60-year-olds and usually involves the outside of the elbow.

**What you can do:** Epicondylitis can usually be cleared up by staying off the tennis court or golf course until the pain improves.

## The PRICE principle for treating common sports injuries

The U.S. Marines say that “pain is weakness leaving your body.” Most of the rest of us would add, “OK, but can't we hurry it up a little?” The answer is yes. Using the PRICE method to treat any common sports injury will help get you back in the game sooner.

First, it's important to know that swelling is a normal response to these injuries. Excessive swelling, though, can reduce range of motion and interfere with healing. You can limit swelling and start healing faster after common sports injuries by using the PRICE principle:

- **P — protect from further injury**  
For more severe injuries, protect the injured area with a splint, pad, or crutch.
- **R — restrict activity**  
Restricting activity will prevent worsening of the injury.
- **I — apply ice**  
Apply ice immediately after a common sports injury. “Ice is the miracle drug” for sports injuries. It's an anti-inflammatory, without many side effects.” Use ice for 20 minutes every one to two hours for the first 48 hours after the injury. Don't use heat during this time — it encourages swelling and inflammation.
- **C — apply compression**  
Compression with an elastic bandage will help reduce swelling.
- **E — elevate the injured area**  
Elevating the injured area above the heart will also reduce swelling.

Over-the-counter pain relievers usually relieve the pain of common sports injuries to a tolerable level. If they don't, it's probably time to see a doctor.

### When to get medical attention for common sports injuries

We know you're tough — but you also need to be smart. If you suspect a serious injury or if you have any of these signs, see a doctor:

- Deformities in the joint or bone — it looks “crooked,” or moves abnormally
- You cannot bear weight or can't use the limb without it “giving way”
- Excessive swelling
- Changes in skin color beyond mild bruising
- It's not getting any better after a few days of PRICE therapy