



The Importance of Rehabilitation After an Ankle Sprain

By Kim Kranz, PT, DScPT, SCS
Chief of Athlete Wellness, USA Gymnastics

It's only an ankle sprain. It will get better on its own with some rest. It's not "that bad". These are some of the things that athletes might hear shortly after an ankle sprain. But is this really the best advice?

Let's start with a little background on ankle sprains. Ankle sprains are a stretching or tearing of the ligaments on the inside or outside of the ankle. Ligaments help to stabilize joints and prevent excess movement. Unlike muscle tears, ligaments heal very slowly and, often, incompletely. Most ankle sprains happen at the outside of the ankle when the foot rolls inward. An ankle sprain will often be accompanied by a lot of swelling and bruising. Ankle sprains are one of the most common injuries in gymnastics and can lead to chronic ankle instability. Chronic ankle instability, characterized by regular episodes of the ankle feeling unstable or giving way and lasting for more than 1 year, occurs in 40% of people with a first-time lateral ankle sprain¹.

A recent research paper² looked at ankle sprains that occurred over a 10-year period in military service members and looked at what happened when they participated in a rehabilitation program right away and when happened when they didn't seek rehabilitation. This study is significant because they followed over 24,500 ankle sprains during that 10-year period. In this study about 25% of the service members received rehabilitation within a month of their first ankle sprain. The study showed that the likelihood of having another ankle sprain increased for each DAY that rehabilitation was not provided during the first week. It also showed that, after 2 months from the initial ankle sprain, the chances of having another ankle sprain were twice as high for the service members who didn't get rehabilitation within the first month. Overall, the study found that the earlier rehabilitation started after an ankle sprain, the lower the chances were of having another ankle sprain.

Rather than watching and waiting for an ankle sprain to heal on its own, this study indicates that the best thing to do is get to physical therapy or see your athletic trainer right away after an ankle sprain to reduce the likelihood of recurrent ankle injuries and chronic ankle instability.

¹ J Athl Train. 2019;54:572-588

² J Orthop Sports Phys Ther 2021;51(12):619-627