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Have You a Bad Ankle?

How many times have you stepped in a pothole or slipped on a stair and turned your ankle? An ankle sprain is one of the most common injuries. An ankle sprain is a tear of one or more ligaments around the ankle. The tear may be partial or total. In a severe ankle sprain, there may even be a fracture of a bone in the leg or foot! Ligaments are bands of tissue that connect bones together. Unlike muscles or tendons, they cannot be strengthened by exercise. The most common type of ankle sprain is an inversion sprain in which the big toe side of the foot lifts off the ground, and the foot rolls to the outside. In the less common eversion sprain, the foot rolls to the inside or towards the big toe. An ankle sprain may be thought of as a "clockwork injury." This means that the damage from an ankle sprain may start at the outside of the ankle, and proceed around the back of the ankle to the inside of the ankle in a circular motion like the movement of the hands of a clock. When this happens, additional damage to ligaments and fractures of bones may occur. That is why if you have a severe ankle injury, you should have it x-rayed immediately to rule out a fracture.

TIPS FOR PREVENTING AN ANKLE INJURY

If you have a high arched foot, you may be prone to an ankle sprain. Secondly, if you have a tight Achilles tendon, you may sprain your ankle easily. You would need to hold a wall push-up stretching exercise for two minutes at a time. Also, if you have a condition called ligamentous laxity, this may cause your ankle to give out more frequently. This is an inherited condition where the ligaments are not as tight as they should be. If you have this condition, you can bend your thumb backwards and touch your arm. Also, the joints in your body may have a much greater range of motion. Also, if you are continually spraining your ankle, you are more prone to injury for several reasons. First of all, the nerves around your ankle may be stretched in an ankle injury. You may lose "position sense": the sensation of where your foot is. Your ankle may start to turn out, and you cannot correct it until it is too late. If you continually sprain your ankle, the ligaments do not have a chance to heal, and they are weaker. So, if you are at risk for spraining your ankle, you should wear high-topped shoes. Also, you should avoid walking on uneven, grassy, fields. Finally, you should do the exercises that I will talk about later in this newsletter.

So, what do you do if you sprain your ankle? If you sprain your ankle and cannot "walk it off", you should call me right away. Because an ankle sprain is one of the most neglected injuries, a lack of initial treatment can lead to a lifetime of chronic ankle instability or other ankle problems.

1. First, you should ice your ankle for five minutes on and five minutes off. You can make a simple ice pack by combining equal parts of rubbing alcohol and water in a zip lock bag and placing it in the freezer. You should continue this for the first 24-48 hours. You should use an ace wrap or ankle sleeve with an enclosed heel to prevent any further swelling of the ankle. This wrap should be left on all the time. It should be loosened as needed.

2. After 24 hours, you should begin static strengthening exercises. Call me before starting these exercises at (301)695-1010. The goal of these exercises is to strengthen the muscles around the ankle so that the next time your ankle starts to give out, the muscles will contract and throw you back to the correct position. These exercises should be done in sets of 10 repetitions twice a day and held for 20 seconds per repetition. First, put the outside of your foot (little toe side) against a door and push. Second, put the top of your foot under a dresser with an opening under the bottom and pretend to lift it. Third, put a towel around your foot and pull with the towel and push down with your foot like you are pushing the gas pedal of your car.

3. Once you can move your ankle without pain, you should begin active exercises. First, put your foot over the end of a chair. You should pretend you have a pencil between your big toe and the next toe, and draw the ABC's. Next, you should hop in place for twenty seconds at a time, and repeat ten times. Please note: do not do the hopping exercise without an ace wrap or other ankle support! Once you have mastered this exercise, you can put two chairs on the floor, and hop in figure eights around them.

4. Once your pain is gone, you should continue to use a supportive ankle wrap for the next two weeks. You should continue the exercises for the next month.

5. If you are involved in sports, you should avoid rough or uneven terrain such as gravel or areas with potholes for at least two months. Be very careful in racquet sports which require quick starts and stops. High topped shoes will provide greater stability initially.

6. Once your ankle is as strong as the uninjured ankle, you can stop the strengthening exercises. You should continue to do the hopping in figure eights, however, for another month. Then, you can return to normal activity.