

## **For patients: Advice (for the first 48 hours) following an acute soft tissue injury**

### **How will I know how severe the soft tissue injury is, and what I need to do next?**

Often, when people have injured themselves (eg they have twisted an ankle or fallen on an arm), they are worried that they might have broken a bone. In many of these accidents, they have just injured their soft tissues, and the injury will heal on its own after taking suitable care and precautions (see below). If you think you have a simple soft tissue injury but are worried, please ask your general practitioner (GP) for advice. You can also call the NHS Direct nurses for advice.

### **What can I do first to prevent further injury?**

**Protect the area:** With all injuries, it is important to prevent further injury occurring. Exactly what you need to do depends on the area that has been damaged. Protective supports can include crutches, a sling, braces, splints and taping. Some of these might be applied by a first-aider (or by yourself); others will need to be applied by your doctor or in hospital.

### **How long should I use these protective supports?**

If you have sought advice from a healthcare professional, they will give you instructions about how and for how long to use any support. How long depends on the severity of injury and in what activities you wish to partake. It is, however, important that you do not use a support indefinitely without seeking professional advice. As a guide:

**For mild injury:** use a protective support for up to 3 days;

**For moderate injury:** use a protective support for 3 to 5 days;

**For severe injury:** use a protective support for more than 5 days.

### **Why is it important to rest the injured area?**

It is important to rest the injured area during the early phase of healing – this prevents the area being stressed. When you first start moving the area again, avoid excessively stressing the healing tissue. As a guide:

**For mild injury:** rest the area for up to 24 hours;

**For moderate injury:** rest the area for 3 to 5 days;

**For severe injury:** rest the area for one week.

### **When is the application of ice useful?**

The application of 'cold' immediately following injury can minimise any swelling, which usually also helps prevent pain. The easiest way is to use some crushed ice, a bag of frozen peas, or an ice compress. Whatever you use, do wrap it in a damp towel before applying it to the skin. Unwrapped ice can lead to an ice burn, which can be painful. Hold the ice in place for 20 to 30 mins and repeat this every two hours until the swelling and/or 'heat' from the injury has gone away.

### **When should I raise the injured area?**

Elevating the injured area (eg leg) above the level of the heart can help minimise swelling and should be applied as soon as possible after the injury. Do ensure that the elevated area is adequately supported; for this reason, it might be easier to lie down (using cushions or pillows). If you can keep a limb elevated, you do not have to apply compression at the same time (see below).

### **When is it useful to compress an injury and of what should I be careful?**

Compression (a controlled form of pressure) can help minimise swelling and should be applied as soon as possible following the injury (see also 'elevation' above). Many types of compression can be used, the most common forms being Tubigrip (pressure 'stockings'), or strapping. These are usually given to you with instructions by a health professional. You need to be careful using compression – it must be removed at night and you need to be sure that it doesn't prevent proper blood flow to the ends of limbs [NB check that the pressure is not greater at the end of the limb that is closest to the body]. Always check the areas that are furthest from the body (eg fingers and toes) for any signs of reduced blood supply (lack of colour or numbness). If you are worried, take the compression off. If you are elevating a limb, don't also compress it.

### **When can I return to sport or strenuous activity?**

You can usually return to sport or strenuous activity when the injured area remains painfree during normal day-to-day activities. If you have sought advice from a health professional, they can usually estimate how long this will take depending on the type and severity of injury. As a rough guide, it can take several weeks for soft tissue to heal adequately. It is normal to feel some discomfort when you first return to sport, but this should not last long. If you are worried, seek advice from your general practitioner or physiotherapist.