



5-minute safety talk

Don't Ignore the Pain of a Sprain or Strain

While the old adage, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," may be considered wise words in some businesses, that's definitely not the case when it comes to injuries in the workplace. Certainly a sprained ankle is not as serious a broken one – but if you don't provide appropriate care, it could mean big headaches in terms of employee recovery, possible further injury and lost productivity. Therefore, it's important to pay attention to sprains.

Overworked joints are susceptible to sprains and strains

A sprain is caused when a person places excessive demands on a joint, which is the place where two bones are connected to each other by a ligament. This extra stress on the joint can cause the ligaments to stretch or tear – the more severe the tear to the ligament, the more severe the sprain. Although any ligament can be sprained, some areas of the body are more likely to be injured than others. Knees, ankles, wrists and fingers are likely candidates for sprains, since we typically place more force on these joints.

Injuries also are related to the type of work you do; i.e., a delivery person who does not follow proper procedures when lifting heavy objects may sprain ligaments in his or her back. It's not always easy to recognize a sprain, since it can resemble a pulled muscle, a bruise or even a broken bone – all of which hurt.

A strain is a tearing of a muscle caused by overexerting or pulling a muscle. Back strains are common occupational injuries. Common symptoms of sprains and strains include:

- Swelling of the injured joint
- Bruising at and around the point of injury
- Signs of pain

Someone with a sprained joint may find it painful to move the injured body part, although the joint may still function. Some sprains may cause only minimal pain. The typical ankle sprain causes damage to the lower ligaments of the ankle joint. This often creates a noticeable amount of pain and swelling. Ankle sprains above the ankle joint can be more bearable because they often cause little swelling or pain. While less painful, they can actually be more damaging because they are often never diagnosed and therefore, are often left untreated.

Likewise, a severe sprain can resemble a broken bone, especially if the injured area appears misshapen. If you're not sure whether an injured worker has a sprain or fracture, play it safe and call for medical help.

Combat sprains and strains with first aid

What's the best way to handle sprains and strains? Common first aid tips include:

- Remove or loosen clothing, jewelry or other constricting objects from around the joint.
- Apply a plastic bag with an ice-water mix, a cold pack or cold compresses on the area to reduce swelling and pain. Put a barrier such as a cloth between the plastic bag and skin. Apply the cold for 20 minutes (or 10 minutes if it produces discomfort), then remove it for 30 minutes. Repeat this for 24-48 hours.
- Elevate the injured area and try to avoid movement for at least 24 hours.
- Rest the injured joint while the pain persists.
- It may be appropriate to take an over-the-counter pain medication, such as aspirin or ibuprofen. Check with a doctor first.

Avoid sprains and strains

Use these procedures to help reduce strains and sprains:

- Modify job procedures to eliminate physical lifting.
- Use mechanical and other lifting devices if possible.
- Divide heavy loads into lighter loads.
- Bend the knees, not the back, when lifting.
- Carry loads close to the body.
- Do not turn or twist abruptly when lifting.
- Slide loads from one surface to the other with the same elevation.

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