

Strains

What is a strain?

A strain is a stretch or tear of a muscle or tendon. Tendons are strong bands of tissue that attach muscles to bones. People commonly call muscle strains "pulled muscles."

How does it occur?

The usual cause of muscle strain is forceful contraction (tightening) of the muscle during an activity. For example, it might happen when you run, jump, throw, or lift a heavy object.

What are the symptoms?

- You may feel a burning or a popping at the time of the injury.
- The injured muscle hurts.
- It is hard to use the injured muscle.
- The injured area may be swollen or bruised.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will examine the injured area and find that it is tender.

How is it treated?

The general rule for treating strains is R-I-C-E:

- **Rest:** At first you will need to avoid activities that cause pain. If you have a leg strain you may need crutches.
- **Ice packs:** Put ice packs on the strained muscle for 20 to 30 minutes every 3 to 4 hours. Do this for 2 to 3 days or until the pain goes away. You can also do ice massage: Freeze water in a cup and tear back the top of the cup. Rub the injured area with the ice for 5 to 10 minutes, three times a day. This is especially useful for strains you have had for more than a few days.
- **Compression:** Wrap an elastic bandage around your strained muscle to reduce swelling.
- **Elevation:** Keep the injured muscle elevated above your heart as much as possible.

Also:

- Depending on which muscle you have strained, you may be given crutches, a brace, or a sling.
- Your health care provider may recommend anti-inflammatory medication or another pain reliever.
- You may be given exercises to help you recover faster.

How can it be prevented?

The best way to prevent strains is to warm up properly and stretch your muscles before exercise. The more flexible and strong your muscles are, the less likely they will be strained.