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Patient information: Ankle sprain (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What happens when a person sprains his or her ankle? — When a person sprains his or her ankle, the ankle joint turns too far in a particular direction. Inside the ankle are tough bands of tissue called ligaments, which hold the different bones together. During a sprain, one or more of those ligaments stretch too far or even tear ([figure 1](#)). This can cause pain and swelling, make the ankle unsteady, and make it hard to put weight on the ankle.

What are the symptoms of ankle sprain? — The symptoms can include pain, tenderness, swelling, and bruising at the ankle. Some people with an ankle sprain also find it hard to move the foot in certain directions. Plus, some people cannot put weight on the ankle.

Is there a test for ankle sprain? — Yes and no. A doctor or nurse should be able to tell if you have a sprain by doing an exam and learning about what happened to your ankle. He or she might move your foot in different directions to see what hurts and to check how loose your ankle feels.

In some cases, a doctor or nurse might order an X-ray to check for broken bones, but that is not always needed.

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — See your doctor or nurse if:

- You cannot put weight on your ankle
- Your ankle looks deformed or crooked
- Your ankle is unstable (for example, it gives out while you are climbing stairs)

It's also best to see a doctor or nurse if you are not sure how serious an injury is.

How is ankle sprain treated? — Treatment for a sprained ankle is easy to remember if you think of the word “RICE.” Here's what those letters stand for:

- **Rest** – To rest the ankle, you can use crutches and stay off your feet.
- **Ice** – Apply a cold gel pack, bag of ice, or bag of frozen vegetables on your ankle every 1 to 2 hours, for 15 minutes each time. Put a thin towel between the ice (or other cold object) and your skin. Use the ice (or other cold object) for at least 6 hours after your injury. Some people find it helpful to ice longer, even up to 2 days after their injury.
- **Compression** – Compression basically means pressure. You want to have your ankle under slight pressure by having it wrapped in an elastic “compression” bandage. This helps reduce swelling. Your doctor or nurse will show you how to wrap your ankle. It's important that you do not use too much pressure and cut off the blood flow to your foot.
- **Elevation** – “Elevation” means you should keep your foot raised up above the level of your heart. To do this, you can put your foot on some pillows or blankets while you are lying down, or on a table or chair while you are sitting.

You can also take medicines to relieve pain, such as [acetaminophen](#) (sample brand name: Tylenol), [ibuprofen](#) (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin), or [naproxen](#) (sample brand name: Aleve).

People who have a mild sprain do not usually need to use a splint to keep their foot and ankle still. But people who have a more severe sprain sometimes do.

In rare cases, doctors suggest surgery to repair a torn ligament caused by an ankle sprain.

Is there anything I can do on my own to feel better? — Yes. Most people who have had an ankle sprain heal more quickly if they do certain exercises. The right exercises for you will depend on what kind of sprain you have and how severe it is. Ask your doctor which exercises you should do.

As time passes, slowly build up the activities you do with your foot and ankle. You might have an easier time doing some activities if you wear a brace or splint on your ankle during your recovery.

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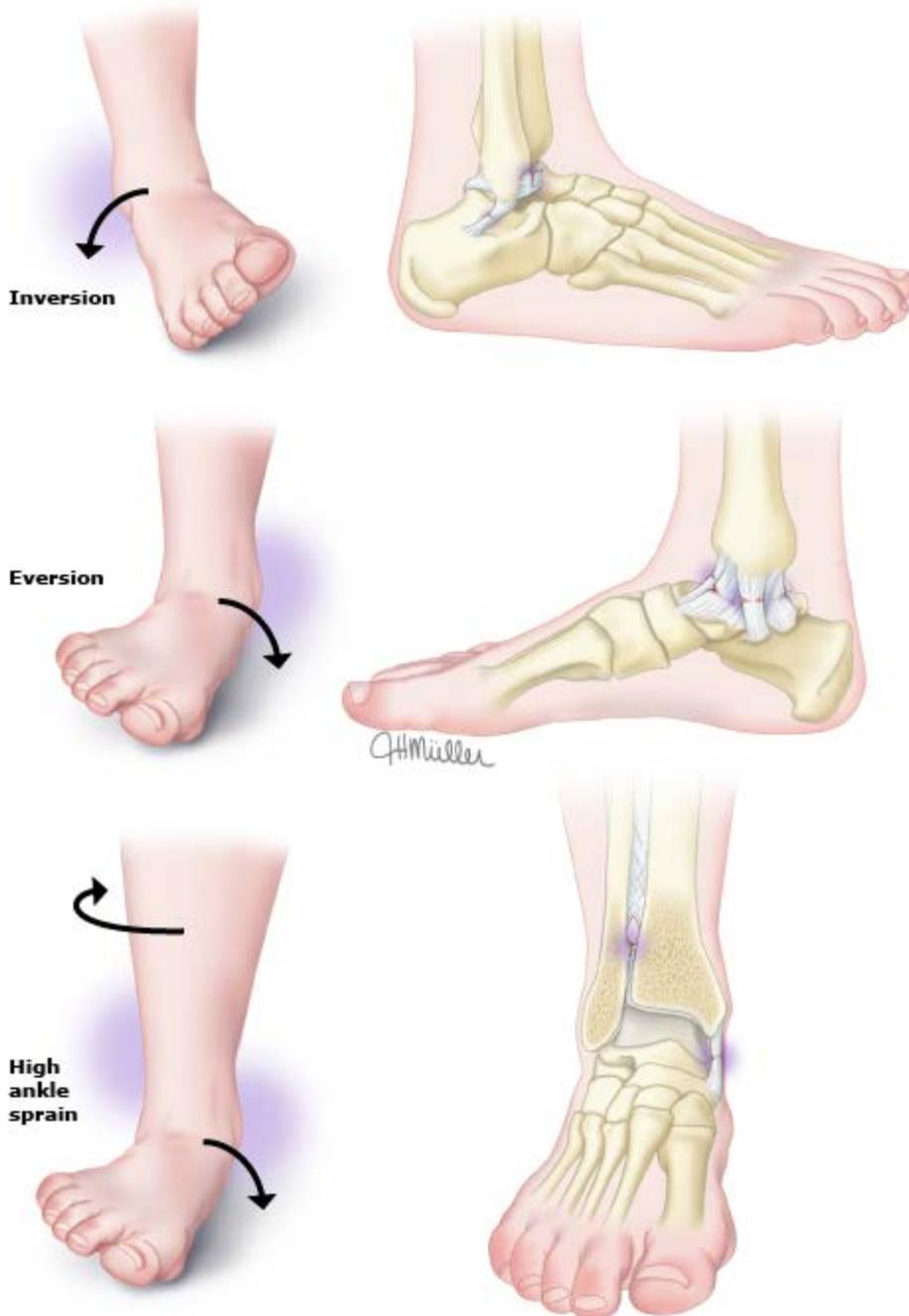
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GRAPHICS

Ankle sprains



When a person sprains his or her ankle, the ankle joint turns too far in a particular direction. Inside the ankle are tough bands of tissue called ligaments, which hold the different bones together. During a sprain, one or more of those ligaments (shown in white) stretch too far or even tear.

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