REBALANCEMD

Acute Ankle Injuries

A Guide to Early Recovery

About Your Injury

Ankle injuries are common. A sudden (acute) injury can result from an awkward landing, a twisting movement, an abnormal bend, or a fall. Pain, bruising, or swelling may appear within minutes of the injury or may not develop until later that day or the next day. Swelling and bruising from ankle injuries can often worsen in the days after an injury and can be quite dramatic.

Acute ankle injuries are commonly sprains or strains involving the ankle ligaments. Ankle fractures, including avulsion fractures, are also common, and many are treated without surgery. Less commonly, acute injuries can affect the cartilage or tendons. Ankle and foot pain can also be related to overuse problems such as tendinopathies, fasciitis, bursitis, a flare-up of arthritis, or a stress fracture.

Protecting Your Ankle

Use a cane, crutches, a walker, or a brace to protect the ankle if it is very sore. If you are using a cane or a single crutch, use it on the side opposite your injured ankle.

You may have been placed in a cast boot after your injury. Unless you have been directed to remain in the boot at all times, you may remove it for hygiene and range-of-motion exercises right away. The cast boot should not be used for longer than 4 weeks unless a physician directs you to do so. You may use an ankle brace after you have weaned from the cast boot. Supportive ankle braces can be purchased at a medical supply store or The Shop at RebalanceMD.

If there is no fracture (broken bone), it is safe to put weight on the leg as you can tolerate. This may be uncomfortable, but it will not damage the ankle.

Rest First, Then Begin Gentle Movement

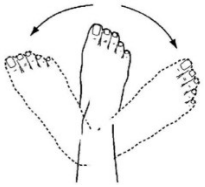
For the first couple of days after your injury, rest your ankle and avoid excessive walking or movements that provoke pain.

After that, begin gentle range-of-motion exercises as soon as you are able. Regaining full motion is one of the most important parts of recovery—not moving the ankle for long periods can lead to stiffness that may be difficult to overcome.

As your ankle recovers, gradually increase your walking. Continue to avoid activities that make your ankle pain or swelling worse afterward. Range-of-motion exercises may cause some discomfort, but they will not damage the ankle. Once your pain and range-of-motion have improved, you may begin strengthening exercises as tolerated.

Movement Exercises

Ankle Inversion & Eversion
Gently turn your foot inward and outward, repeat 10–15 times each way. The goal is for all the motion to come from the ankle, and not from the knee or hip.



Ankle Pumps
Slowly point your toes down, then pull them up toward your shin, repeat 10–15 times. This can be done while elevating your ankle to help pump swelling out of your leg.



Movement Exercises

Ankle Alphabet
Sitting or lying comfortably, use your big toe to “write” the letters of the alphabet in the air. Try to make your letters as big as possible. Repeat the full alphabet 1-3 times.



Toe Curls
Using only your toes, curl and uncurl each digit as far as possible within your pain free range. Repeat 10-20 times each way. Option: Scrunch a towel or pick up marbles with your toes.



Recovery Strategies

Ice & Elevation

Apply ice for 10–20 minutes at a time, as often as every 2–3 hours, to help control pain and swelling. Wrap the ice in a cloth or towel to protect your skin. At the same time, raise your knee and foot above the level of your heart to help control swelling. Gently moving your ankle in this position helps pump fluid out of the leg.

Compression & Bracing

Use a compression bandage (such as a tensor bandage), wrapping from below the ankle up toward the knee. If your ankle is swollen, feels unstable, or needs more support than a tensor bandage provides, your doctor may recommend a supportive ankle brace, such as the Bauerfeind MalleoTrain S, which can be purchased from The Shop at RebalanceMD.

Gait

Try to walk as normally as possible and avoid limping. Regaining motion and strength, and using a walking aid such as crutches or a cane when needed, will help protect your ankle while you recover.

A normal stride includes a smooth heel-to-toe pattern. Try your best to return to a normal stride within your pain tolerance.

Pain Control

Over-the-counter medications can help control pain:

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol) may be used for pain, usually up to 4 times per day.
- An anti-inflammatory medication such as ibuprofen (Advil) or naproxen (Aleve) may be added if you do not have a history of heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, kidney problems, or stomach ulcers.
- Topical diclofenac gel (Voltaren) may also be helpful if you prefer a topical option.

Check with your doctor or pharmacist if you are unsure whether these medications are right for you.

Physiotherapy

Physiotherapy is very helpful for recovery from an ankle injury and can typically begin a few days after the injury. Physiotherapists are trained to assess and treat acute ankle injuries. Contact a physiotherapy clinic near you to book an assessment to be guided through a program tailored to your specific injury and recovery. This is especially important to decrease the chances of further ankle injuries or recurrent sprains.