



## Ankle Sprains and Strains

Among the most frequent workplace injuries each year are strains or sprains to the ankles or feet.

**Sprains** are injuries to ligaments – the fibrous bands that connect bones to bones and stabilize joints.

**Strains** are injuries to muscles or to tendons, which connect muscles to bones.

Generally, sedentary workers who slip, stumble or otherwise take a misstep are more likely to sprain an ankle than a more active employee. Prompt treatment will speed healing and reduce the risk of further injury, but 20% of sprains lead to chronic ankle pain.

When a foot turns unexpectedly, the ligaments or tendons are stretched in a manner in which they are not intended. Major causes include:

- Working on uneven surfaces
- Stepping on something that you didn't see
- Inattention to footing going up and down stairs
- Jumping over something, such as an irrigation ditch

The risk can increase when employees are involved in lifting and bending. Employees that are more likely to suffer a sprain or strain often:

- Use poor lifting techniques
- Have poor endurance
- Are in poor physical condition
- Fail to stretch and warm up before a physical activity

With an acute sprain, the worker may experience localized pain that worsens with further activity. There may be swelling and possible discoloration from bleeding into the muscle. When the sprain occurs, the worker may hear a “pop” or “snap” and actually feel the joint slipping.

In the case of a strain, the worker may complain of pain, loss of function, change in sensation or may feel a defect or swelling along the body of the muscle. Symptoms noticeable in chronic strains caused by repetitive stress include stiffness, soreness and tenderness that may worsen gradually with increased use of the muscle.

Strains and sprains are classified in three categories by severity, but whether it is a sprain or a strain, it is best to have a medical professional evaluate the injury and to determine the best course of treatment.

### **Tips to Avoid a Sprained or Strained Ankle:**

- If work requires a lot of physical activity, be sure to stretch the calf muscles. Tight muscles pull on the Achilles tendon and can reduce the range of motion of the foot.
- When working outside in fields, yards or construction sites where the ground may not be level, wear snugly laced, high-topped shoes that provide the ankles added protection.
- Work on strengthening the ankles to avoid strains and follow a regular exercise routine.
- Wear stable shoes that provide support.
- Avoid wearing shoes with platform soles, high heels or any shoes that throw a foot off balance.

Source: National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), National Institutes of Health, 2009

Safety tips developed based on generally accepted safety standards believed to be reliable at the date of publication. Information is for general guidance only and should not be relied upon for legal compliance purposes.

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