

What to do immediately after an injury

“POLICE”

If you suffer an injury such as a sprain or strain, immediate attention can prevent complications and help you heal faster. One of the most popular acronyms to remember if you get a sports injury is PRICE, which stands for Protection, Rest, Ice, Compression and Elevation. Using these immediate first aid measures is believed to reduce the internal bleeding and swelling, limit pain and protect the injured soft tissue. This regimen is a protocol that should be used immediately when an injury occurs and prior to being treated by emergency professionals or receiving treatment from a sports medicine professional. That is why the protect, rest, ice, compression, elevation mantra has been so popular for such a long time.

Recent peer-reviewed evidence based studies reviewed by sport and orthopaedic healthcare professionals have shown that there is merit to this regimen. However, they go on to suggest that the protocol be revised as **POLICE**; Protection, Optimal Loading, Ice, Compression, and Elevation.

This program should be carried out for a minimum of 72 hours after the initial injury, but can continue for 7 days. Some aspects such as ice can be continued for a longer period and optimal loading should continue throughout the rehabilitation process.

The POLICE Method of Acute Injury Treatment

Protection – First protect yourself from possible injury by adhering to proper warm up routines, training techniques, and equipment usage. If injured, stop playing to protect the injured area from further damage. Use splints/braces or crutches (first 48 hours) as needed to limit any further pain or injury and speed the recovery process until the injury can be assessed. Avoid activities that cause pain.

Optimal Loading – It is important to protect the injured area from further damage and allow an injury time to heal. Being brave and playing through pain will cause further injury. However, the key is ACTIVE REST, because at complete rest a muscle loses 3-5% of its strength every day! For a day or two after an injury avoid putting too much weight on it or stretching it too much. However, it is REALLY important to get moving again after a few days before the muscles start to weaken and the joint stiffens causing even more problems. That is where **Optimal Loading** comes in. Knowing how much loading (weight bearing) to apply should be supervised by a qualified sports medicine professional, but some examples include: partial weight-bearing or weight-bearing as tolerated; and using 1 or 2 crutches. These techniques help stimulate cartilage healing and aid in re-orientation of muscle scar tissue, placing weight through the injured area. Balancing on the injured leg (with support as needed), for example, will stimulate ligament scar tissue orientation and strength. While it is important to rest, begin optimal loading as soon as you can. How much loading you can tolerate will depend on the extent of your injury. Make sure to follow the advice of your health care professional.

Ice- Apply ice for up to 20 minutes every 1-2 hours for a minimum of 72 hours. Cold provides short-term pain relief and also limits swelling by reducing blood flow to the injured area. When icing an injury, choose a cold pack, crushed ice or a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a thin towel to provide cold to the injured area. Never apply ice directly to the skin and never leave ice on an injury for more than 20 minutes at a time. Longer exposure can damage your skin and even result in frostbite or burns.

Compression – Swelling can delay healing. Compression of the swollen area will help limit and reduce the swelling. An easy way to compress the area of the injury is to wrap an ACE bandage around the swollen part. If you feel throbbing, or if the wrap just feels too tight, remove the bandage and re-wrap the area so the bandage is

a little looser. Without compression, swelling will spread beyond the injury site, which can result in a greater loss of movement and can prolong the rehabilitation period.

Elevation - Elevating the injured area can help to reduce and control the swelling. Elevate the injured area above the level of the heart. For example, if you injure an ankle, try lying on your bed with your foot propped on one or two pillows. Elevation should be used for as long as swelling remains.

After a day or two of treatment, many sprains, strains or other injuries will begin to heal. But if your pain or swelling does not decrease after 48 hours, make an appointment to see a sports medicine physician or go to the emergency room, depending upon the severity of your symptoms.

Gentle stretching and range of motion exercises should be started after most of the swelling has subsided. Try to work the entire range of motion of the injured joint or muscle, as well as the entire limb, but be extremely careful not to force a stretch, or you risk re-injury to the area. Keep in mind that a stretch should never cause pain.

Finally, strengthening and balance exercises are extremely important. With an injury there will be loss of balance, coordination and strength no matter how long the rest period is. Without proper attention you will be at a great risk of re-injury. That is why it is helpful to work with your physician and sports physical therapist or athletic trainer. Expert guidance can help you progress more quickly without overdoing it. It is always best to choose a rehab expert who has experience with athletes and is familiar with your sport to ensure proper rehab progression.

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