

Education

Lateral Collateral Ligament Sprain

What is lateral collateral ligament sprain?

A sprain is a joint injury that causes a stretch or tear in a ligament, a strong band of tissue connecting one bone to another. The lateral collateral ligament is located on the outer side of the knee. It attaches the thighbone (femur) to the outside bone in the lower leg (fibula).

Sprains are graded I, II, or III depending on their severity:

- Grade I sprain: pain with minimal damage to the ligaments.
- Grade II sprain: more ligament damage and mild looseness of the joint.
- Grade III sprain: the ligament is completely torn and the joint is very loose or unstable.

How does it occur?

The lateral collateral ligament can be injured by a twisting motion or from a blow to the inner side of the knee.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include the following:

- You have pain on the outer side of your knee.
- Your knee is swollen and tender.
- You have the feeling of your knee giving way.
- You hear or feel a pop or snap at the time of injury.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask how you injured your knee. He or she will examine your knee for tenderness on the outer side of your knee. He or she will gently move your knee around to see if the joint is stable and if the ligament is stretched or torn. Your provider may order x-rays or a magnetic resonance image (MRI) of your knee.

How is it treated?

Treatment may include:

- applying ice to your knee for 20 to 30 minutes every 3 to 4 hours for 2 to 3 days or until the pain and swelling go away
- elevating your knee by placing a pillow underneath it (to help reduce swelling)
- taking anti-inflammatory medicine or other drugs prescribed by your health care provider
- wrapping an elastic bandage around your knee to keep the swelling from getting worse
- using crutches until you can walk without pain
- doing rehabilitation exercises
- surgery to repair a complete tear.

How long will the effects last?

The length of recovery depends on many factors such as your age, health, and if you have had a previous knee injury. Recovery time also depends on the severity of the sprain. A mild lateral collateral sprain may recover within a few weeks, whereas a severe sprain may take 6 weeks or longer to recover. Completely torn lateral collateral ligaments may require surgery. If you need surgery to repair a torn ligament, your recovery may take 1 to 3 months. Ask your health care provider when you will be able to resume your normal activities.

When can I return to my normal activities?

Everyone recovers from an injury at a different rate. Return to your activities will be determined by how soon your knee recovers, not by how many days or weeks it has been since your injury has occurred. In general, the longer you have symptoms before you start treatment, the longer it will take to get better. The goal of rehabilitation is to return you to your normal activities as soon as is safely possible. If you return too soon you may worsen your injury.

You may safely return to your normal activities when, starting from the top of the list and progressing to the end, each of the following is true:

- Your injured knee can be fully straightened and bent without pain.
- Your knee and leg have regained normal strength compared to the uninjured knee and leg.
- Your knee is not swollen
- You are able to walk, bend and squat without pain.

Return to your prior level of activity gradually. Talk to your health care provider about a knee brace to wear during sports. If pain occurs, contact your health care provider and decrease your activity to a pain-free level. If you feel that your knee is giving way or if you develop pain or have swelling in your knee, you should see your health care provider.

How can I prevent a lateral collateral ligament sprain?

Unfortunately, most injuries to the lateral collateral ligament occur during accidents that are not preventable. However, you may be able to avoid these injuries by having strong thigh and hamstring muscles, as well as by gently stretching your legs before and after exercising. In activities such as skiing, be sure your ski bindings are set correctly by a trained professional so that your skis will release when you fall.

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