SYMPTOM

Ankle pain

Ankle pain is discomfort in or around the ankle joint.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Aching, sharp, or throbbing pain, sometimes with swelling

WHERE IT IS FELT
The ankle joint and nearby soft tissues

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Sprains, overuse, tendon irritation

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Hot swollen ankle with fever, or deformity after injury

USUALLY LASTS
Days to weeks, depending on injury type and severity

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Not improving after two weeks, worsening, or repeatedly returning

Overview

Ankle pain can come from the joint or nearby ligaments, tendons, muscles, bones, and nerves. It may begin suddenly after twisting or landing awkwardly, or develop gradually from repeated activity, unsuitable footwear, arthritis, or tendon irritation.

Most minor ankle injuries improve with self-care and gradual movement. Severe injuries, infection, and problems affecting blood flow or nerves need prompt medical assessment.

What it may feel or look like

Ankle pain may feel aching, sharp, burning, throbbing, or stiff. It may occur while walking or continue at rest. Other symptoms include swelling, bruising, warmth, tenderness, weakness, or a feeling that the ankle may give way.

Pain on the outside often follows a twisting injury. Pain at the back may involve the Achilles tendon, which connects the calf muscles to the heel. Pain on the inside or front can have several tendon or joint causes.

A popping sound does not always mean a broken bone. However, a pop followed by major

swelling, weakness, or difficulty walking should be assessed.

Common causes

Common causes include:

A sprain often happens when the foot rolls inward. Swelling and bruising may develop over several hours. Mild sprains may allow walking, while more serious sprains make weight-bearing difficult.

Tendon pain usually develops gradually and may worsen during activity, when climbing stairs, or after rest. It can affect the Achilles tendon or tendons along either side of the ankle.

Less common causes include gout, nerve irritation, inflammatory arthritis, pain referred from the leg or foot, and a stress fracture caused by repeated loading.

Urgent causes include a major fracture, dislocation, loss of blood flow, or infection in or around the joint.

- An ankle sprain, when ligaments are stretched or torn
- Overuse from running, walking, jumping, or a sudden activity increase
- Irritation of a tendon around the ankle
- Joint stiffness or arthritis
- Footwear that fits poorly or lacks support

When to seek medical care

Go to an emergency department after an injury if:

Seek same-day care if the ankle is hot, red, and swollen and you have a fever or feel generally unwell, as this can indicate infection. Same-day assessment is also sensible after an injury if you cannot take a few steps, swelling is severe or rapidly increasing, or pain remains intense despite rest.

Get prompt advice if you have diabetes, poor circulation, reduced feeling in your feet, or a weakened immune system and develop swelling, redness, or a wound.

Book a routine appointment if pain worsens, keeps returning, interferes with normal activities, or is not clearly improving after about two weeks of self-care. Persistent morning stiffness, unexplained swelling, or pain in several joints also needs assessment.

- The ankle is clearly deformed or bone is visible
- The foot becomes cold, pale, blue, or persistently numb
- There is uncontrolled bleeding or a deep open wound
- The injury followed a major fall, collision, or crushing force

How the cause is found

A clinician will ask when the pain began, whether there was an injury, and which movements affect it. They may also ask about activities, footwear, previous ankle problems, fever, other painful joints, and medical conditions.

The examination may check swelling, bruising, tenderness, movement, stability, strength, sensation, and blood flow. You may be asked to stand or walk if safe.

An X-ray may be needed if a fracture is possible, but not every injury requires one. Ultrasound or MRI may be used when a tendon, ligament, cartilage, or hidden bone problem is suspected, particularly if symptoms do not improve.

Blood tests may help identify infection, gout, or inflammatory arthritis. Sometimes fluid is removed from a swollen joint and tested.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause and severity. For a recent minor injury, protect the ankle and reduce painful activities. Ice wrapped in a towel and used for short periods may ease pain and swelling. Elevating the ankle can also help.

A supportive bandage or brace may be useful, but it should not cause numbness, increasing pain, or colour change in the foot. Begin gentle movement as comfort allows because staying still too long can increase stiffness.

Return to walking and exercise gradually. Rehabilitation may focus on movement, calf strength, and balance. A physiotherapist can help after a significant sprain, repeated instability, or tendon injury.

Non-prescription pain relief may help. Follow the label and ask a pharmacist if you are unsure what is suitable. Anti-inflammatory medicines are not appropriate for everyone, including some people with stomach ulcers, kidney disease, bleeding risks, or pregnancy.

Fractures may require a boot, cast, or surgery. Infection needs urgent treatment. Gout,

arthritis, and persistent tendon problems require treatment for the underlying cause.

What to expect

A mild sprain or overuse problem may improve within several days, although swelling and stiffness can last for weeks. Serious ligament injuries, fractures, and tendon problems often take longer.

Pain should become less limiting over time, although mild swelling may return after activity. A sudden increase in pain, new numbness, increasing redness, or loss of function should be assessed.

An ankle that repeatedly gives way may not have regained strength and balance. Rehabilitation and reviewing footwear, activity, and training habits may reduce further injuries.

Common questions

Should I walk on a painful ankle?

After a minor injury, gentle weight-bearing may be reasonable if you can walk without severe pain or marked limping. Do not force it. Seek assessment if you cannot take a few steps or the ankle appears deformed.

Does bruising mean the ankle is broken?

No. Bruising can occur with sprains and fractures, and being able to walk does not rule out a fracture. An examination can determine whether an X-ray is needed.

Should I use heat or ice?

Ice may ease pain and swelling soon after injury. Heat may help longer-term stiffness, but avoid it on a newly injured, hot, or very swollen ankle. Protect your skin from direct contact with either.

Why does my ankle hurt without an injury?

Gradual pain can come from overuse, tendon irritation, arthritis, gout, footwear, or a stress injury. Arrange an appointment if it persists, worsens, or keeps returning.

Sources

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