

Returning to Sport after Injury

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Few things beat the irritation of a sports injury, especially when you are unable to continue training. Whether amateur or professional, those serious about their sport find it very hard to stay away for long time periods. Many still believe in the no-pain-no-gain-theory, and force themselves onwards through pain. Unfortunately, if you do not allow yourself enough good quality recovery time, proper healing is unlikely to take place, and the risk for re-injury is much higher. But then when is a good time to return to sport after injury?

Recovery time will depend on the nature and severity of your injury, and the stage of recovery that you are in. The three stages of recovery are the acute inflammatory phase, repair phase and the remodelling phase.

Stages of healing

Acute inflammation takes place in the first 72 hours after injury, and is characterised by pain, swelling, warmth and redness around the injured area. Inflammation is your body's way to protect the injured area and send primary fighter cells to clear up any injured tissue. During this time, we want to give the body a chance to heal itself and not put too much strain on the area. Apply the RICE strategy:

R – Rest: Limit weightbearing or forceful movement of the limb. Use a brace, strapping or crutches if necessary.

I – Ice: Apply ice or an icepack to the area for 20 minutes, every 2 hours. Place ice inside a wet towel to prevent direct contact with the skin.

C – Compression: use a compression bandage during the day, especially for injuries to the leg, wrist or hand.

E – Elevation: Attempt to always position an injured arm or leg as high as possible when sitting or lying down. Rest the limb on a pillow at night, or try to put the foot on a footstool during office time.

The **repair phase** may take anything from 72 hours to 6 weeks after the injury. The body starts to lay down collagen in the injured area to replace the damaged structures. During the **remodelling phase**, this collagen is arranged and moulded to be able to perform the functional capabilities of the structure that it is replacing. This can take place over a period of 3 weeks up to 12 months. **If this process is constantly interrupted, chronic pain or re-injury is almost a given.** For this reason, it is very important to NOT return to sport too soon. Start with controlled reconditioning during these stages. It is strongly advisable to exercise under the supervision of a health care professional, who will be able to guide your rehabilitation according to the appropriate stages of healing.

Returning to sport

How will you know when you are ready to return to sport? Unfortunately, there are no clear-cut rules to answer this question, since many factors will influence this decision. Below are some guidelines and important things to remember:

- Recover and rehabilitate under the **supervision of a healthcare professional**, such as a physiotherapist, biokineticist or sport doctor. Even as little as two or three visits may save you a lot of time and frustration in the long run.
- Never force through any **pain** or even moderate discomfort. When your body says “enough”, it is always for a good reason.
- Only continue with regular exercise once the **joint can move through its full ranges** in all directions of movement (compare it with the other side if you are uncertain).
- Do NOT expect to start where you stopped before injury. **Gradual** is the keyword. Whatever your training may entail, start off slower, smaller or lighter and gradually build up from there.
- Be sure to **recondition all necessary aspects** applicable to your sport – not only strength, but also fitness, agility, flexibility, coordination and endurance.
- In the case of team sports, first **train with the team** for at least a week before competing again. For your first match, do not play for longer than one half of the game.
- If any form of **re-injury** occurs during follow-up sport, immediately stop your activity to prevent further damage.

Motivation

An important (and often neglected) aspect of returning to sport is your motivation. Why are you so keen to get back on track? Is it the fear of deconditioning, picking up weight, deterioration of your health or missing out on the social and recreational component? Perhaps your sport may be a primary source of income to you? Whatever your reason, it is important to outweigh the risks and benefits of when you return. Going back too soon might mean that you miss the rest of the season due to re-injury, or you may be delaying proper healing over the long term.

So hang in there, upcoming Mr Bolt! The road to recovery is hardly ever a sprint, but definitely a marathon which is well worth finishing.