LATERAL ANKLE SPRAIN

WHAT IS A LATERAL ANKLE SPRAIN?

This is a very common but painful injury that occurs when the set of ligaments on the outside of the ankle, which normally hold 3 adjacent bones in position, are overstretched due to sudden, excess loading. This may result in microscopic tearing of the fibres within the ligaments.

Sports people are particularly prone to this type of injury, though it may happen to anyone if their foot suddenly twists inwards (if you were to tread awkwardly on a step, for example).

A lateral ankle sprain requires careful rehabilitation and treatment in order to reduce the chances of it recurring. If these ligaments are damaged, or have been damaged in the past, an individual can report a constant feeling of instability and of the ankle wanting to 'give way', particularly on uneven surfaces.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Shortly after injury there is usually noticeable swelling, bruising and pain along the outside of the ankle, and this can make walking, or even weight-bearing, very difficult. If you attend A&E it is probable that you will have an X-ray to rule out an ankle fracture.

It is important to note that if a lateral ankle sprain is not treated properly, or promptly, after a sprain, then the chances of experiencing another in the future increase dramatically. This is because healthy ligaments help transmit information to your brain about the positioning of your joints, and this acts as a protective mechanism to help keep you stable (when you are as stepping off a kerb, for example).

If this information is not fed back to your brain effectively, then you may experience some instability putting extra strain on the ligaments as they attempt to maintain joint integrity. This increases the chances of another sprain. Generally, the more ankle sprains you have, the more likely it is you'll have another.

HOW IS IT TREATED?

As the treatment plan depends on the severity of the ankle sprain then X-rays and further imaging may be required to highlight the extent of any damage caused.

If the sprain is in an acute, inflammatory phase then resting and protecting the area is the cornerstone of any treatment, allowing the area time to heal. Icing, compression and elevation will also help.

As the area heals it is important to keep the joint flexible by incorporating motion into the rehabilitation, along with stretching and strengthening the surrounding muscles. Balancing exercises are very important as this helps target the muscle groups surrounding the ankle.

It is highly likely, therefore, that part of the treatment plan will involve the use of a wobble board, with the aim of improving both your strength and balance. Rehabilitation is often undertaken in stages and can utilise both static and dynamic methods.

If you have a biomechanical problem that makes you prone to this kind of injury then you may be issued with some insoles. Footwear, training, and return-to-activity advice will be given to allow you a full, gradual return to your chosen activity.

This leaflet has been written to help you understand more about the problem with your foot. This leaflet is not a substitute for professional medical advice and should be used in conjunction with verbal information and treatment given.