

# Calf strains and tears

Emergency Department

Information for Patients

Produced: December 2025

Review: December 2028

Leaflet number: 1681 Version: 1

## What is a calf strain or tear?

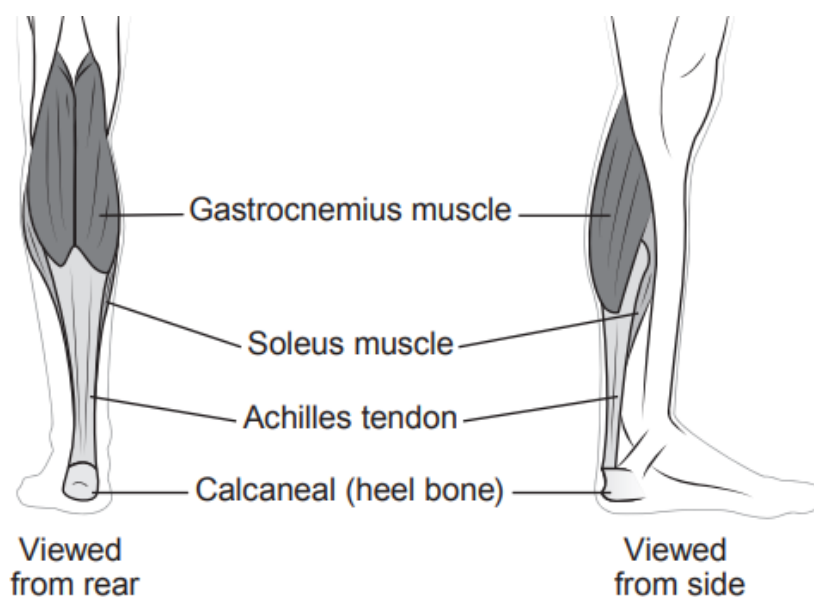
A calf strain is a common injury that happens when the muscles at the back of your lower leg are over stretched, or have too much force put through them. This causes an injury of the muscle fibres.

## What could I hurt ?

The calf has 2 main muscles:

1. The gastrocnemius: the large muscle closest to the surface.
2. The soleus: which sits underneath the gastrocnemius.

Both of these muscles join to your Achilles tendon.



**Health information and support is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

Visit [www.uhleicester.nhs.uk](http://www.uhleicester.nhs.uk) for maps and information about visiting Leicester's Hospitals  
To give feedback about this information sheet, contact [uhl-tr.informationforpatientsmailbox@nhs.net](mailto:uhl-tr.informationforpatientsmailbox@nhs.net)

## What symptoms might I have?

- **Pain:** When you strain your calf you may feel a sudden tearing or sharp pain.
- **Stiffness:** With minor strains you may be able to carry on with your activity. Overtime you may feel tightening, discomfort and stiffening in your calf muscles.
- **Bruising and swelling:** If the strain is severe, you may have to stop what you are doing and might struggle to walk. You may get swelling and bruising in your calf that may spread down your leg.
- **Reduced strength:** You may find it uncomfortable to push up from your foot or to stand on tiptoes until it has healed.

## What is the best way to treat a calf sprain or tear?

For the first 2 to 3 days (unless we have said differently) we advise following the 5 steps called PRICE.

1. **Protect:** Protect the injury. For example, by using a support if you were given one. Stop heavy lifting, sports, or activities that are repetitive, or any exercise or activities that are painful. You may have to offload your weight on crutches if the strain is bad.
2. **Rest:** Stop heavy lifting, sports, or activities that are repetitive. Avoid long periods of standing. You may have been given crutches to help rest your leg. It is important to gently move your leg to stop it becoming stiff. Movement may even help with healing. There are exercises in this leaflet that you can do to help.
3. **Ice:** Apply an ice pack or a bag of frozen vegetables to the area to help reduce swelling. Wrap the ice in a tea towel, or something similar, to prevent damaging the skin. You can do this for up to 20 minutes every 2 to 3 hours. Do this at least for the first 3 days.
4. **Compression:** We may have put on a compression bandage to help reduce swelling. Not everyone will have been given this. You can try using a football sock or hiking sock at home, or you can buy elastic bandages at most pharmacies. We recommend taking this bandage off at night and while you have a bath or a shower. Put it on again before you get out of bed in the morning. Mild pressure that is not too uncomfortable or too tight, and does not stop blood flow, is ideal. We recommend that you do not use it for more than 3 days. This is because the bandage may limit movement of the joints which should normally be moving more freely after this time.
5. **Elevation:** Keep your leg raised as much as possible, above the level of your heart if possible. This can help reduce swelling and discomfort

## Do no HARM for 3 days after injury:

- **Heat.** Do not use heat. Heat may cause increased bleeding and swelling. Heat such as hot baths, showers, heat packs, and saunas should be avoided when inflammation is developing. After about 3 days no further inflammation is likely to develop. After 3 days heat can be soothing.

- **A**lcohol. Avoid alcohol. It can increase bleeding and swelling and reduce healing.
- **R**unning. Do not run or do strenuous exercise, as this may cause more damage.
- **M**assage. Avoid massage, as this may increase bleeding and swelling. After 3 days gentle massage may be soothing.

## How long will it take to get better?

Calf injuries should settle within 6 to 8 weeks. Everyone is slightly different depending on how bad the initial injury was.

A bigger tear can take up to 12 weeks to recover. You may have been referred to physiotherapy for on going review, but this is not always needed.

It is advisable that you do not return to sports and higher impact activities until you have full strength, and full movement and you can walk quickly without experiencing pain and swelling.

If you experience a significant increase in pain and/or swelling you will need to reduce your activity levels until this starts to settle. Then slowly build up your activity levels and regain strength and flexibility before returning to full training sessions.

## Advice to follow:

- **Follow up:** We do not routinely follow up patients with calf injuries as they usually heal well. If you are still experiencing significant symptoms after 6 weeks, please contact your GP for review.
- **Pain relief:** Take painkillers regularly. Do not let the pain get too bad before taking them. Paracetamol and/ or Ibuprofen can be helpful. These can be bought from the pharmacy and instructions on use are on the packet. If you are taking other medicines and are unsure if you can take these, please talk to a pharmacist.
- **Driving:** Return to driving when you are able to perform a full emergency stop confidently and it is pain-free.
- **Work:** If you do not feel capable of working because of pain or reduced movement/mobility, you are able to self-certify sickness for the first 7 days. If you were not given a fit note from ED you can talk about this with your GP if you feel you need longer than a week off.

## When to seek medical advice?

- If you experience tingling/change in sensation to the lower leg or foot that is not going away with movement.
- Your pain **significantly** increases.
- You feel or hear a sudden pop or snap in your Achilles tendon which is painful, you struggle to walk, or can feel a gap in the tendon.
- You have redness, heat and increased pain in your calf or feel unwell with fevers.

Have symptoms of a blood clot in your calf, known as a Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT).

- This may feel like a new throbbing or cramping pain, not related with the injury pain, in 1 leg, often in the calf or thigh.
- Or you have a new swelling (swelling is expected with the injury, if this is with a new pain it could be a symptoms of a DVT)
- Or you have warm skin around the new painful area.
- Or the skin changes colour and may be red or darkened around the painful area (bruising can be expected around the site of injury and down the leg).
- Or you can feel swollen veins that are hard or sore when you touch them.

See your GP or call 111 if concerned.

## Stretches

Stretches, are another way of reducing your symptoms. A mixture of exercise and stretching can help. Many people find stretching helpful in the early phases of healing. They may be uncomfortable but should not cause pain.

### Gastrocnemius stretch:

1. Place your injured leg's toes against a wall with your knee straight.
2. Feel the stretch in your calf muscles.
3. Hold for 30 seconds. Repeat 3 to 5 times.
4. Repeat as above, this time with your knee bent.



### Soleus stretch:

1. Stand on a step and hold onto a wall or rail. Let your affected.
2. Heel hang off the end of the step and bend both knees to stretch the calf muscles.
3. Repeat this exercise keeping the knee of your affected side straight.
4. Hold 20 to 30 seconds. Repeat 3 to 5 times.



## Exercises

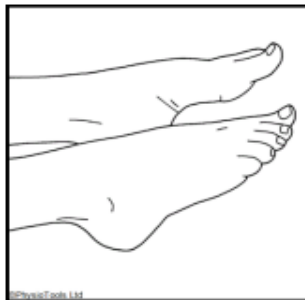
Exercise can help improve blood flow, healing and prevent stiffness of surrounding joints. This will help in your recovery.

Exercises should not be painful, but may cause a bit of discomfort, this is normal. If the exercises are painful stop doing them and try again in a day or 2.

Take pain killers at least 30 minutes before if needed.

### Exercises to do straight away

1. Lying on your back or sitting. Bend and straighten your ankles or feet up and down.
2. If you keep your knees straight during the exercise you will stretch your calf muscles.
3. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds. Repeat up to 10 times.



### Seated heel raises:

1. Sit in a chair. Lift your heels up, then lower your heels down.
2. Now raise your toes, then lower them down.
3. Hold 5 to 10 seconds. Repeat up to 10 times.



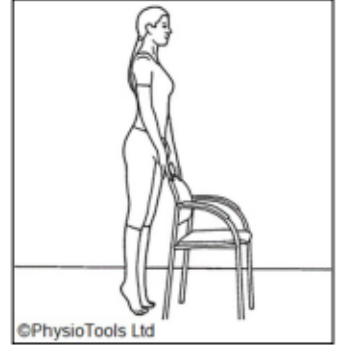
### Exercises to build up to from 2 weeks/ as your pain allows

You can now stop the previous exercises.

The aim of these exercises are to build strength in both calf muscles. The muscle should feel tired after, but not painful. If you have pain after, rest for a day or 2 and return to doing half of what you did before you had the pain. Then build up how many exercises you can do again.

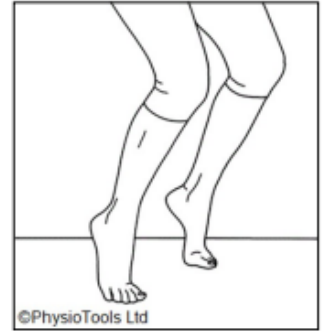
### Standing straight leg heel raises:

1. Stand holding onto the back of a sturdy chair or table.
2. Keep both knees straight throughout the exercise.
3. Push up onto your toes, lifting your heels, then your lower heels.
4. Try to keep your knees straight until you have completed the exercise.
5. Hold for 3 seconds. Repeat up to 8 to 12 times. Repeat 3 to 4 times in a day.



### Standing bent leg heel raises:

1. Stand holding onto the back of a sturdy chair or table.
2. Keep both knees bent throughout the exercise.
3. Push up onto your toes, lifting your heels, then your lower heels.
4. Try to keep your knees bent until you have completed the exercise.
5. Hold for 3 seconds.
6. Repeat up to 8 to 12 times.
7. Repeat 3 to 4 times in a day.



Progression: repeat exercises on a step/bottom stair with half your foot off. This will allow your heels to lower below you toes and make for a harder movement.

### Self-referral to physiotherapy

You have the option of a delayed referral to physiotherapy should you feel your calf is weak, or your knee and ankle are stiff. If you feel you require physiotherapy then please call **0300 300 0046**

### Contact details

Injuries Unit, Emergency Department, Leicester Royal Infirmary: **0116 258 5727**

اگر آپ کو یہ معلومات کسی اور زبان میں درکار ہیں، تو براہ کرم مندرجہ ذیل نمبر پر ٹیلی فون کریں۔  
على هذه المعلومات بلغةٍ أخرى، الرجاء الاتصال على رقم الهاتف الذي يظهر في الأسفل  
જો તમને અન્ય ભાષામાં આ માહિતી જોઈતી હોય, તો નીચે આપેલ નંબર પર કૃપા કરી ટેલિફોન કરો

ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ ਚਾਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੋ, ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਹੇਠਾਂ ਦਿੱਤੇ ਗਏ ਨੰਬਰ 'ਤੇ ਟੈਲੀਫੋਨ ਕਰੋ।  
Aby uzyskać informacje w innym języku, proszę zadzwonić pod podany niżej numer telefonu

If you would like this information in another language or format such as EasyRead or Braille, please telephone 0116 250 2959 or email [uhl-tr.equalitymailbox@nhs.net](mailto:uhl-tr.equalitymailbox@nhs.net)