

How to Treat Your Injured Calf



Information for people attending urgent care sites

Telephone: 01275 546852 (Clevedon MIU) | 01454 315 355 (Yate MIU) | 0117 342 9692 (Bristol MIU)



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The calf provides the 'push off' power when walking and running. A calf strain involves damage to some of the muscle fibres within the belly of the muscle or where the muscle fibres join the achilles tendon.

Your body's first response to injury is inflammation, during which your calf may become hot, swollen and painful. This inflammatory phase may last from one to several days depending on the severity of your injury.

During the first three days

Avoid walking on the injured leg, use crutches or a stick if provided. When resting elevate the leg to discourage swelling. Do not apply any bandaging whilst resting.

Frozen peas or crushed ice in a damp tea towel can be applied to the injured area. For maximum effect apply for 20 minutes every two hours.

Once the calf feels less hot and painful, it is important to start gently exercising the injured muscle. This may be uncomfortable at first, but is essential to prevent tightness and weakness and to encourage the natural healing process.

The following exercises should be performed slowly and thoroughly, moving into some discomfort but short of pain. They can be repeated four to five times daily.

Exercise 1

Move your foot up and down at the ankle stretching as far as possible in each direction. To start with you may find it easier to do this with your knee bent. As soon as you are able, do the exercise with the knee straight to increase the stretch.

Repeat x 10.

Exercise 2

Slowly move the foot and ankle in as large a circle as possible. This can be done in both clockwise and anticlockwise directions.

Repeat x 10.

After three days

As soon as you are able to put weight through the injured leg, start to get up and about more. Short walks are good for the healing muscle, but avoid long distances and standing for long periods. You may find it more comfortable in shoes with a thicker or higher heel to start with, as this will lessen the stretch on the calf. Typically people tend to walk with their foot turned outwards and in front of them, but this should improve as each day goes by.

Try and discard your crutches as soon as possible and please remember to return them to the Emergency Department.

Later exercises

The following exercises are helpful in getting full stretch and strength back in the healing muscle.

A degree of discomfort during exercise is acceptable, but never push through pain.

The exercises can be repeated three to four times daily.

Exercise 3

Deep calf stretch - Stand leaning forward on a firm surface, placing your injured leg in front with the foot flat on the floor. Lean slowly forwards allowing the knee to stretch over the foot, but keeping the heel flat on the floor. Hold at the point of tightness for up to 15 seconds, repeat four times.

Exercise 4

Normal calf stretch Stand facing and leaning with your hands on a wall. With feet facing forward, place the injured leg behind with the heel to the floor and the knee straight.

Stretch to the point of discomfort or tightness and hold for 15 seconds, repeat four times.

Compare the stretch with your uninjured leg, they should eventually be the same.

Exercise 5 – To improve strength

Stand facing and leaning with your hands on a firm surface with feet placed slightly apart. Taking as much weight as you need through your hands, rise up on to your toes and down again.

Repeat for as many times as you feel reasonable.

As the exercise gets easier reduce the support through your hands.

Eventually you should be able to do the exercise on the injured leg alone. Test your good leg to see the maximum number of repetitions you can do. Work towards the same number on the injured leg.

Pain relief medication

Pain relief medication can help you to reduce the pain allowing you to undertake any suggested exercises and movements of the injury. Moving will help ease the pain and speed up your recovery significantly. Simple pain relief medications such as Paracetamol and Ibuprofen are often all that is required. Please read the medication instructions before taking anything.

Call 111 if you urgently need medical help or advice but it's not a life-threatening situation.

For less urgent health needs, contact your GP or local pharmacist in the usual way.

It is important to continue exercises three to five until there is no difference between your two legs, to reduce the chance of a repeat injury.

For the first two weeks following injury avoid excessive discomfort during activity. Exercise such as cycling, swimming and walking are good for the healing muscle.

However do not return to any form of running sports until the calf has regained full stretch and strength.

You may be aware of tightness in the muscle after prolonged inactivity or first thing in the morning. This will gradually settle.

Depending on how severely your calf is injured, it may take up to eight weeks to return to normal.

Seek urgent medical help if any of the following occurs to you, as this may signs of a blood clot in your calf or chest;

- Increased swelling and tightness to the entire calf or lower leg
- Calf becomes very red and hot to touch
- Calf becomes very painful all over, not just in one area
- Calf veins show swelling
- Difficulty breathing, pain on breathing or chest pain

Contact us

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They are led by our specialist emergency nurse practitioners, who are fully trained in both adult and paediatric care.

Bristol Urgent Treatment Centre

Open 8am-8pm, 7 days a week
South Bristol NHS Community Hospital,
Hengrove Promenade, Hengrove, Bristol BS14 0DE
T: 0300 124 6260

Yate Minor Injury Unit

Open 8am-8pm, 7 days a week
Yate West Gate Centre, 21 West Walk, Yate, BS37 4AX
T: 0300 125 6800

Clevedon Minor Injury Unit

Open 8am-9.00pm
(last admission 8.30pm), 7 days a week
North Somerset Community Hospital
Old Street, Clevedon BS21 6BS
T: 01275 546852

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statement.

Date of creation: 05/2026 Date for review: 05/2028 URN: 0271

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