



Managing pain in sport

Strategies for recovery

Pain is a normal part of life and anybody who plays sport or exercises has probably experienced pain either through injury, exertion or overuse. Pain is a threat signal that is designed to protect us. Pain tells us to stop what we are doing because we might be doing damage to our body. Pain also reminds us that we might not want to do the thing that led to the experience of pain again in the future because it hurts or causes injury. Pain is often described in a variety of ways such as, sharp, dull, ache, throbbing, burning, stabbing, stinging and shooting.

Top tips for treatment

Listen to your body

- If you are experiencing pain, especially at higher levels, stop what you are doing and seek medical advice.

Follow the directions of your medical professionals

- They are the experts in the field and understand what it takes to get you safely back in action.

Choose your team wisely

- Pick professionals you trust and who are willing to take the time to discuss your pain/injury concerns with you.

You may need care from different professionals

- The treatment of injury, and particularly persistent pain, often requires help from a team of professionals who all work together to get you back in action again. Professionals might include your general practitioner (GP), surgeon, physiotherapist, psychologist or exercise physiologist.

Remember you are part of your rehabilitation team, not a spectator

- Asks questions and understand what is happening to your body and why you are being asked to do the rehabilitation activities you have been prescribed.

Recovery is an active process

- You have to do things and follow advice to recover. This includes rest. If you have been prescribed rest, then resting is an active process towards getting better.

Be aware of your risk

- Having a previous injury is a risk factor for having a similar injury in the future. Stick to your rehabilitation plan. There is nothing more frustrating than making an injury worse, or re-injuring yourself just when you thought you'd recovered.

Time on the sidelines

Continue to follow the advice of your treating professionals

- If your treating professional has prescribed three sets of 10 repetitions, do three sets of 10 repetitions. Doing more will not translate to recovering faster, but could make your injury worse. On the other hand, if you are experiencing pain or your injury feels like it's getting worse based on their prescribed rehabilitation plan, stop and advise them immediately.

Consider your mindset during recovery

- How you think about your pain or injury will influence how you experience pain. Acceptance is an important part of successfully recovering from injury and pain. Those who refuse to accept their injury/pain, or give up on recovery, often have poor outcomes. Those who develop an 'active acceptance' tend to do well in recovery where they accept what is happening and move on with the required steps towards rehabilitation. Active acceptance also tends to lead to better emotional outcomes during the rehabilitation journey.

Being on the sidelines can be a frustrating and lonely place

- Remember, this too shall pass and it is better to get the pain/injury rehabilitated effectively in the first instance to reduce the potential for frustration from making an injury worse or re-injury. If you feel frustrated or down as a result of being stuck on the sidelines, it might be helpful to find a psychologist to help you manage your emotions as a result of being injured or experiencing pain.

Avoid alcohol

- Alcohol can increase your risk of injury and can also dramatically increase the time it takes to recover from injury.

Take care of your body when you are experiencing pain/injury

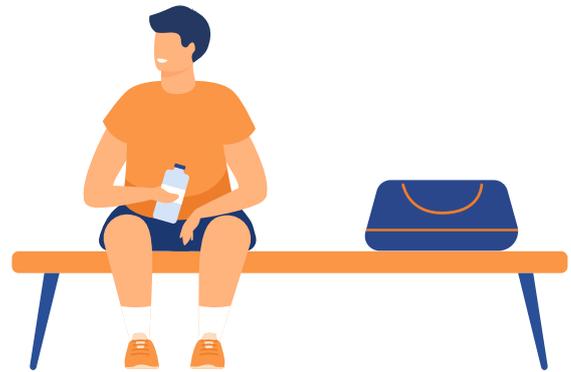
- Focus on eating healthy food, drinking plenty of water and getting enough sleep, as they are all important building blocks for the body to recover.

Work on things you might have been neglecting due to your sport or exercise activities

- Focus on a hobby, or a relationship or friendship that has been neglected, or make repairs around the house.

Work on your game

- Work on parts of your game you might have been neglecting. For example, a sport and exercise psychologist can assist you with the mental side of your game. Mental skills and techniques such as goal-setting, emotion regulation, mental imagery, self-talk, focus and concentration, can all be developed during downtime from sport and exercise. Developing mental skills can be beneficial to both your injury/pain recovery journey as well as for when you return to sport or exercise.



Know when to get help

- If your injury or pain is so severe that you have to consider transitioning out of sport, a sport and exercise psychologist can assist you with your decision-making and journey.

Use an app

- Diaphragmatic (or controlled) breathing and mindfulness are extremely effective tools in negotiating injury and pain as they assist to regulate emotion, distract us, help to relax our body, and help to reduce pain. There are a variety of apps that can teach you both skills and guide you through the process (e.g., Headspace, bit.ly/3d9AfZq).

Ensure you are doing what you can to maintain your fitness

- Discuss what activities you can do with your treatment team and work with them to develop a plan for maintaining as much conditioning as possible for when you return to sport or exercise.

Avoid the 'boom and bust cycle'

- This cycle occurs when we push our pain/injury past what we can tolerate (boom) and the resulting flare-up in pain or worsening of injury occurs (bust). Remember, pain is a warning signal and if we keep pushing through our pain, our brain will subsequently keep us in pain. Athletes and exercisers tend to be the type of people who push themselves, which is good for improving performance, but not good when experiencing injury/pain – "No pain, no gain" is not the correct mindset for negotiating injury and pain. Remember to pace yourself instead.

Pace yourself

- To effectively pace ourselves, we need to identify how much movement or activity we can tolerate before a flare-up in our injury or pain occurs and stop the activity before it kicks in. By stopping an activity before a flare-up, the brain begins to feel safe that there is no threat and therefore does not need to keep sending the warning signal – pain. Work with your treatment team, to slowly and carefully increase your movement and activity by small amounts over time.



Return to play

- Only return to your normal level of exercise or sporting activity with the go-ahead of your treating team.
- You may feel a great deal of pressure to return as soon as possible. This can be particularly difficult for young people. It is extremely important to return-to-play only with the guidance of your treating team. For young people experiencing pressure to return-to play before they are ready, ensure you discuss it with a parent or your treatment team.
- Ensure that when you return to training or playing that you continue to focus on your rehabilitation, warm-up, warm-down and recovery. This will give you the greatest chance of avoiding injury, aches and pains, as you return to your normal exercise routine.

Seek support

If you feel the stress and emotional and mental challenges associated with the pain you or your family members are experiencing is getting too much, a psychologist may be able to help. Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals skilled in helping people with a range of mental health concerns, including the psychological difficulties that come with the experience of pain.

A psychologist can help you manage your difficulties with pain using techniques based on the best available research.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be able to get a Medicare rebate. You may also be able to receive psychology services via telehealth so you don't need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details. There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:

- use the Australia-wide [Find a Psychologist™](#) service. Go to findapsychologist.org.au (within "search by issue" you can go to the "general health" list and select "pain management") or call 1800 333 497
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians manage chronic pain.

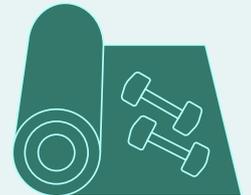
Visit psychweek.org.au/2020-resources for more.

More information

Australian Psychological Society

The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians manage chronic pain.

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Pain Australia

[Pain Australia](#) has a number of resources for the general public and health professionals to assist with the experience of pain.

Sports Medicine Australia

The [Sports Medicine Australia](#) website has a number of resources for the general public and health professionals about sports injuries. It also has resources for how to treat injuries in the first instance.

Neuro Orthopaedic Institute (NOI)

The [Neuro Orthopaedic Institute](#) undertakes research and provides training and resources to assist with preventing, understanding, and managing chronic and persistent pain.

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