

Prevent **Ankle Instability** with **Prompt Treatment**

An estimated 28,000 ankle injuries occur daily in the United States, and ankle sprains are the most common injury in sports. But beware the notion that a “simple sprain” does not require medical treatment. Failure to treat acute ankle injuries promptly and properly can result in weakened ligament support, making patients vulnerable to chronic ankle instability and pain.

“Ankle instability refers to any condition in which patients develop recurrent ankle sprains and the ankle feels loose and turns or gives way easily,” explains Kevin Lutta, MD, a foot and ankle specialist at Commonwealth Orthopaedics. “Anybody – whether an athlete or not – can develop this problem after a severe ankle sprain.”

Sports that involve quick changes in direction leaves ankles especially vulnerable to unnatural twists. Other reasons for ankle injury among athletes include landing awkwardly from jumps, stepping on another athlete’s foot, trauma to the ankle when the heel lands during running, and stressing the foot when it is in a fixed position. Non-athletes are equally vulnerable. Walking on uneven surfaces, falling off a curve – even turning while doing household chores – can result in an injury.

It’s important to have the sprain properly diagnosed to determine its extent and dictate the proper therapy. Dr. Lutta recommends checking for deformity, swelling, discoloration, point tenderness and the ankle’s range of motion – the foot’s ability to move in all its normal positions.

Anyone who has ever had an ankle injury is at risk of developing chronic instability. Patients with this condition usually experience multiple sprains over a short period of time, repeat episodes of the ankle giving way and persistent pain, which may suggest other injuries to the ankle.

Initial, non-surgical treatment options include ankle bracing and an aggressive physical therapy program that focuses on functional rehabilitation (see sidebar). Surgery is usually a last resort. “Surgery should be considered only after conservative approaches such as rehabilitation and bracing have been exhausted and pain is interfering with daily life,” Dr. Lutta says. “Surgical options include secondary ligament repair as well as ligament reconstructions with tendon grafts or tendon transfers.”

It is important that each patient is carefully screened by a qualified surgeon to determine the most appropriate course of action.



Kevin C. Lutta, MD, graduated with a BA in Biology from Clark University. He earned his medical degree from Howard University College of Medicine, where he was named to Alpha Omega Alpha Medical Honor Society. He completed his residency in orthopaedic surgery at Howard University Hospital and went on to a fellowship in foot and ankle reconstruction at Pennsylvania Hospital, part of the University of Pennsylvania Health System.

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Retrain Those Muscles! Physical Therapy for Ankle Instability

One of the most effective treatments for ankle instability is physical therapy (PT). Typically, it involves various exercises to strengthen the ankle, improve balance and range of motion, and retrain muscles. As patients progress through rehabilitation, they can work on issues that relate specifically to their activities or sport.

“Physical therapy is important in reactivating neural communication and strengthening the muscles that support ankle stability,” explains Adam Cecil, PT, DPT, ATC, a physical therapist at Commonwealth’s Reston clinic. “The stronger the muscles in the lower leg are and the better reactivity they possess, the more support they provide the ankles.”