

Return To Play

No athlete likes to be sidelined with an injury. One of the goals of sports medicine is to try and get athletes back into action as soon as possible. However, returning too soon, before adequate healing or recovery has occurred, can put athletes at risk for re-injury and possibly an even longer down time.

With the right game plan for sports injuries, from early and accurate diagnosis and treatment to full functional rehabilitation, you can often safely accelerate your return to play.

A Lesson from the Pros

Why does it seem that professional athletes return to play so much faster? Professional athletes are usually in tremendous physical condition at the time of their injury. This fitness level helps them in many ways as studies have shown that good conditioning not only prevents injuries, but can also lessen the severity of an injury and speed recovery.

Professional athletes get prompt treatment when an injury occurs, which lessens the acute phase of an injury. Early treatment means that there is less swelling, stiffness and loss of function. High level, motivated athletes work extremely hard with a physical therapist and/or certified athletic trainer during their recovery.

In addition, they bring to their recovery what they bring to their sport--a positive attitude, which can be the most important ingredient for a speedy and successful recovery.

Tips From The Pros To Speed Your Recovery

- Maintain balanced physical conditioning all year round.
- Make sure that injuries are recognized early and treated promptly.
- Participate in a full functional rehabilitation program.
- Stay fit while injured.
- Keep a positive, upbeat attitude.

Your Recovery Plan

Recovery from an injury involves a series of logical steps from the time of the injury until you are able to be back on the field or court. Each step should be outlined and monitored by your physician and physical therapist or athletic trainer, and coach.

During the acute phase, the focus should be on minimizing pain, swelling, and inflammation. This involves the RICE formula: Rest, Ice, Compression and Elevation, along with a limitation of activities.

During this period, it is very important to maintain overall conditioning while the injury heals. Creative techniques can be used to safely work around the injury. For example, a

runner with a leg injury can often run in water or use a stationary bicycle to maintain conditioning. Even if one leg is in a cast, the rest of the body can be exercised by performing strength-training exercises. Do not wait until your injury is healed to get back into shape.

In the next phase of recovery, you should work on regaining full motion and strength of the injured limb or joint. Your physician, therapist or certified athletic trainer should outline a detailed plan. For most injuries, gentle protective range of motion exercises within comfortable limits can be started almost immediately. Muscle function can be maintained with the use of electrical stimulation or simple strengthening exercises.

When range of motion and strength return to normal, functional drills can be started. This may include brisk walking, jumping rope, hopping or light jogging for lower extremity injuries and light throwing or easy ground strokes for upper extremity injuries. Specific balance and agility exercises can bring back coordination that may have been lost in the injury.

Once you have progressed with motion, strength, endurance and agility, and are tolerating functional drills without any pain or swelling, you can try higher levels of functional tests and drills that incorporate sport specific movement patterns you need to be able to do on the field or court. This is monitored by your physical therapist or certified athletic trainer. You may find that tape, braces or supports help during this transition time.

Only when you are practicing hard without significant difficulty and the healing has progressed to the point where the likelihood of re-injury or harm is low, are you ready to return to play. During these final phases of recovery, you should be closely monitored and special attention should be given to adequate warm up before and icing after activity.

A Word of Caution

Following the rational progression of recovery not only lessens the chance of re-injury but also assures that you will be able to perform at your best when you return to play. All too often, athletes think they are ready to return as soon as the limp or the swelling subsides. They may feel good, but they are probably only 70 to 75% recovered. This only invites re-injury and increases the athlete's chances of missing even more time.

Sports medicine experts are working on ways to help athletes get as close to 100% recovery from injuries as possible, as quickly and safely as possible. There is often tremendous pressure to get athletes back as soon as possible, but the athlete's health and safety must be placed above all other concerns.