

RETURN TO PLAY



AOSSM SPORTS TIPS

WHAT DOES RETURN TO PLAY MEAN?

Return to play refers to the point in recovery after an injury or surgery when an athlete is able to participate in their sport or activity at a level similar to that before the injury or the surgery took place.

No one likes to be sidelined with an injury. One of the goals of sports medicine is to enable an athlete to participate in his or her sport as soon as possible. When an individual returns before adequate healing and recovery, he or she can risk a re-injury and possibly a longer rehabilitation.

When dealing with sports injuries, employing the right game plan — from early diagnosis and treatment to full functional rehabilitation — can often safely accelerate an athlete's return to play.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE PROS

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

Professional athletes usually get prompt treatment after an injury. This lessens the acute phase of the injury. Early treatment often means less swelling, stiffness and loss of muscle tone. In addition, the pros work extremely

hard with a physical therapist and/or a certified athletic trainer during their recovery.

Additionally, they bring to their recovery what they bring to their sport: a positive attitude and a strong desire to get better as soon as possible. While you may not have access to many things professional athletes have, you can harness the power of a positive attitude for your own benefit during recovery.

TIPS FROM THE PROS TO SPEED YOUR RECOVERY

- Maintain year-round balanced physical conditioning
- 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

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR ROAD TO RECOVERY

Recovery from an injury proceeds with a series of logical steps beginning with the initial injury and ending with the athlete returning to his or her sport at a functional level similar to that before the injury. Each step should be outlined and monitored by your physician and your physical therapist.

During the acute phase, the emphasis should be to minimize swelling and decrease inflammation. This involves the RICE formula (Rest, Ice, Compression and Elevation) along with restricting activities. Depending on your injury,

treatment may also involve surgery, bracing or casting.

During this initial 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 second phase of recovery, the athlete should work on regaining full motion and strength of the injured limb or joint. A specific plan should be outlined by a physician, physical therapist or certified athletic trainer. For most injuries, gentle protective range of motion exercises can be started immediately. Muscle tone can be maintained with the use of electrical stimulation or simple strengthening exercises.

When strength returns to normal, functional drills may be initiated. 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 as a result of the injury.

In addition, many therapists are now using “core stabilization” techniques to improve athletic function during rehabilitation. Core stabilization or strengthening involves performing specific exercises on a large rubber ball. Since many normal rehabilitation exercises

are more difficult when performed on a ball, this enables the athlete's central muscles – upper and lower back and abdominals, or “core” of the body — to become stronger.

Once the athlete has progressed with improving motion, strength, endurance and agility, and is able to tolerate functional drills, he or she can try higher levels of functional tests and drills. These often incorporate sport-specific movement patterns on the field or court. These drills should be monitored by your physical therapist or athletic trainer. You may find that tape, braces or other supports help during this transition time.

Only when the athlete is practicing at a high level without difficulty and the healing has progressed where the likelihood of re-injury is low is he or she ready to return to play. During these final phases of recovery, the athlete should be closely monitored and special attention given to adequate warm-up before, and icing after, the activity.

A WORD OF CAUTION

Following a systematic progression of recovery not only lessens the chance of re-injury but enables the athlete to perform at his or her best when he or she returns to play. Frequently, athletes convince themselves that they are ready to return after the limp or the swelling subsides. They may feel ready to return, yet they are often only 70 to 75 percent recovered. This situation invites re-injury.

Sports medicine experts are using medical technology to help athletes return safely from injuries with 100 percent recovery as quickly as possible. There is often tremendous pressure to get the athlete back as soon as possible, but the athlete's health and safety must be placed above all other concerns.

A systematic recovery plan is used successfully every day, at all levels of play, from the recreational athlete to the elite professional or Olympic athlete.

Expert Consultant:
Albert W. Pearsall IV, MD

Sports Tips are brought to you by the American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine. They provide general information only and are not a substitute for your own good judgement or consultation with a physician. To order multiple copies of this fact sheet or learn more about other orthopaedic sports medicine topics, please visit www.sportsmed.org.

A world leader in sports medicine education, research, communication and fellowship.



Copyright © 2008. American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine. All rights reserved. Multiple copy reproduction prohibited.