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- [Diabetes](#)
- [Eye Health](#)
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- [Heartburn/GERD](#)
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- [Skin Problems](#)
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## **Fitness & Exercise**

### **Hamstring Strain**

Unfortunately, hamstring strains are both common and painful. They strike athletes of all sorts -- runners, skaters, and football, soccer, and basketball players, to name a few.

But first, what is a hamstring? It isn't actually a single "string." It's a group of three muscles that run along the back of your thigh. They allow you to bend your leg at the knee.

During a hamstring strain, one or more of these muscles gets stretched too far. The muscles might even start to tear. You're likely to get a hamstring strain during exercise that involves a lot of running and jumping or sudden stopping and starting.

Getting a hamstring strain is also more likely if:

- You don't warm up and stretch before exercising.
- The muscles in the front of your thigh (the quadriceps) are a lot stronger than your hamstrings.
- You're a teenager going through a growth spurt.

### **What Does a Hamstring Strain Feel Like?**

Mild hamstring strains may not hurt too much. But severe ones can be agonizing, making it impossible to walk or even stand.

Other possible symptoms of a hamstring strain are:

- Sudden and severe pain during exercise, along with a snapping or popping feeling.

- Pain in the back of the thigh and lower buttock when walking, straightening the leg, or bending over.
- Tenderness.
- Bruising.

To diagnose a hamstring strain, a doctor will give a thorough physical exam. He or she will ask specific questions about how the leg was injured.

#### What's the Treatment for a Hamstring Strain?

Luckily, minor to moderate hamstring strains usually heal on their own. You just need to give them some time. To speed the healing, you can:

- **Rest the leg.** Avoid putting weight on the leg as best you can. If the pain is severe, you may need crutches until it goes away. Ask your doctor or physical therapist if they're needed.
- **Ice your leg** to reduce pain and swelling. Do it for 20-30 minutes every three to four hours for two to three days, or until the pain is gone.
- **Compress your leg.** Use an elastic bandage around the leg to keep down swelling.
- **Elevate your leg** on a pillow when you're sitting or lying down.
- **Take anti-inflammatory painkillers.** Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), like ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) or naproxen (Aleve, Naprosyn) will help with pain and swelling. However, these drugs may have side effects, like an increased risk of bleeding and ulcers. They should be used only short term, unless your doctor specifically says otherwise.
- **Practice stretching and strengthening exercises** if your doctor recommends them. Strengthening your hamstrings is the best protection against hamstring strain.

In severe cases where the muscle is torn, you may need surgery. The surgeon will repair the muscles and reattach them.

#### When Will a Hamstring Strain Feel Better?

Recovery time depends on how badly you injured the hamstring. Keep in mind that people heal at different rates. While you get better, you should strengthen the hamstring with a new activity that won't aggravate the strain. For instance, runners could try doing laps in a pool.

Whatever you do, don't rush things. Don't even try to return to your old level of physical activity until:

- You can move your leg as freely as your uninjured leg.
- Your leg feels as strong as your uninjured leg.
- You feel no pain in your leg when you walk, jog, sprint, or jump.

If you start pushing yourself before the hamstring strain is healed, you could re-injure the hamstring and develop permanent muscle weakness.

#### How Can I Prevent a Hamstring Strain?

As hamstring strains can be nasty injuries, athletes should work hard to avoid them. After all, healing a hamstring strain is much harder than preventing it. Here are some tips:

- Stretch before and after physical activity.
- Always increase the intensity of your physical activity slowly -- no more than a 10% increase a week.

- Stop exercising if you feel pain in the back of your thigh.
- Stretch and strengthen hamstrings as a preventative measure.

#### WebMD Medical Reference

Reviewed by Sharon Horesh Bergquist, MD on March 04, 2011

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