



## WHAT IS A STRAIN AND HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO HEAL? Douglas A. Foulk, MD



The majority of muscle injuries that occur in sports are muscle strains. These occur at the junction between the muscle and tendon and are different than a sprain, which affects the ligaments. The most common muscle strain injury involves the hamstrings. It remains unclear if factors such as strength and flexibility predict injury and recovery. Certainly a previous strain injury places an athlete at risk for additional injury.

There is no real consensus on when it is safe for an athlete to return to activity following a muscle strain. A recent strain may predispose surrounding muscle and tendon to an increased risk of injury and therefore rest and suspended activity is essential to begin the healing process. Once the muscle is near pain-free, the focus shifts to regaining full range of motion and strength without increasing pain. Surgery is rarely indicated for muscle/tendon injury, however exciting new innovative approaches, such as growth factor application, may hold promise.

Clearly, prevention of this injury is the best approach for athletes to take. Some data suggest that a proper warm up before activity is the best tactic for reducing muscle strain injuries. In the event that a strain does happen, ice, to reduce inflammation of the area can help reduce recovery time.

