Treating Fitness Injuries with “R.I.C.E.”

The most common fitness injuries are “soft-tissue” injuries—sprains, strains, “pulls,” and bruises. While the best means of dealing with sports injuries is prevention, accidents do occur and knowing what to do first in case of injury can help prevent further damage as well as help speed the recovery. For most soft-tissue injuries, the first aid treatment is R.I.C.E.- Rest, Ice, Compression, and Elevation.

Rest

Rest means restricting movement. As soon as you experience pain, stop your activity. Forget the old saying, “No pain, no gain.” Pain is the body’s way of communicating that something is wrong, so don’t neglect the message. By resting an injury for the first few days, you’ll stop excess bleeding (internally and externally) and will promote healing of damage tissues without complications. Sometimes splints, tapes, or bandages are necessary to prevent unnecessary movement.

Ice

Applying cold compresses to a soft-tissue injury reduces bleeding and swelling (caused by “pooling” of blood) by narrowing blood vessels. The preferred schedule for applying “ice” to such injuries is 10 minutes on and 5-10 minutes off. Always wrap ice or compresses in an absorbent towel or cloth; applying ice directly (or wrapped in plastic) can cause frostbite and additional injury. Use cold compresses for the first 24-36 hours following an injury to reduce pain and swelling.

Compression

Compression, or pressure, helps to reduce swelling and blood flow to the injured area. Apply pressure by wrapping the injury in an elastic bandage. Compression should always be done together with “icing.” (You can even soak your pressure bandage in cold water before application to aid cooling.) While pressure bandages must be tight enough to restrict blood flow, they should not cut off blood flow altogether. If your toes or fingers begin to feel numb or lose their color, loosen the bandage!

Elevation

Elevation reduces internal bleeding and “pooling” of blood in the injured area, and helps blood return to the heart more easily. To be most effective, the injured area should be elevated above heart level. Keep the injured area elevated whenever possible, not just during “icing.” Elevation also helps eliminate pain by reducing the “throbbing” sensation caused by blood coursing to the injury site.

When to Call a Professional

While many minor fitness injuries can be treated safely at home, never hesitate to call if a more serious injury is suspected. If you are unable to move the affected area, and/or immediate severe swelling occurs, you may have a broken bone which will require prompt, professional treatment. If in doubt, seek professional medical help. Taking care of an injury until professional help is available can make the difference between a fitness injury and a fitness disaster.

This document was prepared by the staff of the UWSP Student Health Promotion Office.
This information should not be used in lieu of medical care.
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