

To Strap or Not to Strap – that is the question

By Paula Shingler, BSc, MCSP

I often wonder how many rolls of tape are used at a State League. I also wonder how many of these rolls are necessary. I have often witnessed an ankle being firmly strapped up- nice and tight so there is minimal movement and no chance of a sprain.

Strapping can make muscles lazy

Ankles have more use than just to hold up the legs. They are a complex mixture of ligaments, muscles, bones, joints and nerves neatly working together to give support to the body, providing cushioning for forces and providing proprioception (balance and co-ordination receptors that provide the body with vital information about positioning). When an ankle is strapped firmly to prevent movement, the normal function of the ankle is removed. Muscles do not have to work, ligaments do not have to provide stability, and important proprioceptors are masked. If strapping is used frequently muscles, ligaments and proprioceptors become lazy and switch off so when they are actually needed they cannot remember what to do leaving the ankle more prone to injury!

Strapping can minimise re-injury chances

Even so, I love strapping- if it is used at the appropriate time. In the event of an acute injury, strapping to prevent excess movement is excellent. If applied immediately after injury so that the movement that caused the injury is restricted it can assist in quick recovery. The strapping will limit the causative action but still allow the rest of the ankle to

move normally. This means that the muscles keep working, the normal flexibility is maintained and proprioceptors remain working but there is minimal chance of re-injury. This allows you to start walking without limping, doing exercises to regain movement, strength and proprioception quickly. As the healing takes place the strapping should be reduced so the body's own tissues can get back to their normal job.

'Just in case' strapping can lead to continued weakness

If prolonged strapping is used these tissues will get lazy and never regain their normal function. A light strapping before your first post-injury jog is a good idea for your confidence but should be discarded as soon as possible. Firm strapping 'just in case' can lead to continued weakness and instability. It can also transmit extra forces to the knee, hip, and low back and cause balance issues- not ideal in rough terrain!

Work hard on rehabilitation

Ankle rehabilitation is really easy to do if perhaps not terribly exciting. It does not require lots of equipment or expensive visits to physio. Single leg standing, tip-toeing, stepping, hopping and squats; all are easy to do and really effective in retraining muscles and proprioceptors. Make yourself a wobble board - excellent for retraining ankles and knees. A piece of wood balanced on an old tennis ball is the simplest one -or if you are feeling flush someone will happily sell you a commercial one! It is always an idea to get

an injury checked out by a registered physio, so you can get a rehabilitation programme tailored to your specific needs. Remember to describe the type of running you do and how rough the terrain can be - it's a bit different from the average road runner who might trip on a kerb!

Strengthen muscles to help compensate for ligament laxity

Ligaments, once stretched, do not recoil as they have no elasticity. Strengthening muscles round the ligament can compensate for the laxity and provide the stability required. Chronic ligament laxity can be a problem and if an exhaustive rehab programme has been undertaken and there is still instability, then this may be a good case for strapping more regularly. This should be on medical advice and strapping should be specific to the individual's needs. Also undertaking a continuing strengthening programme is essential to maintain as much normal ankle function as possible. So next time you are packing your bag for an 'O' event and reach for the roll of tape, ask yourself if you really need it. Have you tried to strengthen your ankles rather than relying on tape to support you? Have you thought about the long term damage you could be doing? Remember your muscles are potentially stronger than tape!

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