

How to Avoid Common Hiking Injuries



Most of us are stressed out staying indoor being a homebody during the pandemic, hiking thus becomes one of the most popular recreational activities. During weekends, city dwellers are venturing out to Hong Kong's hiking trails, enjoying the stunning landscape and breathing in fresh air through their masks.

But hiking involves more unpredictable variables than other sports like hitting the gym or running, which could lead to an injury. Sprained ankles and other foot injuries are very common. What can you do to prevent these injuries?

What is an ankle sprain?

A sprain is a tear of a ligament. Ligaments are the tough fibrous tissues that connect the bones together across a joint. Ligament tears can vary from very minor - a few fibres stretched - to complete tears of the entire ligament. The most common type of sprain is a lateral ankle sprain, where the ligaments on the outer part of the ankle joint are sprained.

Tips to avoid ankle sprains

Wear proper footwear – a good pair of hiking shoes can provide protection and support to your ankle; it can keep your feet dry and be light enough to move easily.

Pick the right trail that suits your fitness level – There are dozens of hiking routes in HK which vary in difficulty and ability. Familiarise yourself with the trail. Avoid steep climb or challenging track if you are at the beginner level.

Warm-up – get your body prepared before hitting the trail. Spend 10-15minutes warming up muscles and tendons by doing stretches like high knees and leg swings.

Stay cautious and energised – Injuries are likely to occur when dehydration and fatigue kick in, especially in the late morning or late afternoon. Under this condition, reduced awareness and increased clumsiness will occur and easily lead to injury. Trekking poles can help you keep your balance, especially travelling over uneven terrain.

What is the treatment?

'First Aid' treatment is known as 'RICE' which is intended to reduce pain and swelling.

Rest – get the hiker to sit down and rest to minimise the swelling and discomfort.

Ice – Apply ice to the ankle. If ice is not available, cold water is good enough.

Compression – Pad the injury with socks or other soft items, then wrap around with an elastic bandage. Start from the toes and wrap upward, it can provide stability but should not be too tight that cause numbness, or increased pain.

Elevation – Elevate the foot above the level of the heart to reduce swelling.

If the pain is tolerable, slowly and carefully head back to where you start and take the weight off from the injured person. A trekking pole will come into handy now as it provides a great deal of support. If the person experiences great pain even after the above steps, immediate medical assistance will be needed.

How long will it take to get better?

A very minor sprain may only be sore for a few moments. In contrasts, a severe sprain or complete tear of the ligaments may not recover at all without an operation. Still, it is worth trying 3 months of physiotherapist-supervised rehabilitation before saying 'this is not getting better, an operation is needed'.

If you experience any discomfort after hiking, please consult your doctor.

Plan well, hike safely and have fun exploring outdoors for weekend getaways!

About the author

Dr SW Kong is an orthopaedic surgeon focusing on foot & ankle surgery. He is a Chinese hot-pot fan and a sports lover.

