

Finding Balance

Tips for Helping With Proprioception and Balance Within the Ankle Joints



A physically active body must achieve a stable balance around each active joint for top performance. Ligaments connect the bones to each other and provide much of the joint's stability. Muscles are connected to bone by tendons, allowing for movement at the joints.

Although the ligaments connecting the bones in the ankle are necessary for proper function, there are several muscles that also help support the ankle during any type of activity. Building strength and proprioception, or special awareness, in these muscles helps to prevent injury and improve performance.

In addition to decreasing ankle injuries, strengthening lower leg muscles will help prevent chronic conditions such as shin splints and Achilles tendonitis.

Proprioception

Proprioception is the body's ability to realise its place in space. If an athlete is moving into a position that could sprain his or her ankle, increased proprioception can decrease the risk by alerting the athlete to the danger. Proprioception can also increase an athlete's performance. An athlete with superior balance and awareness will be able to control his or her body more effectively. This is especially true in sports like basketball and soccer, but valuable in all sports or training. Proprioceptive training is done with balance exercises.

Balance and control exercises

You can usually start balance and control exercises when you are able to stand without pain. But talk to your doctor or physical therapist about the exact timing. Also, don't try these exercises if you could not have done them easily before your injury. If you think you would have felt unsteady doing these exercises when your ankle was healthy, you are at risk of falling when you try them with an injured ankle. Practice your balance exercise at least once a day, repeating it about 6 times in each session.



1. Stand on just your injured foot while holding your arms out to your sides with your eyes open. If you feel unsteady, stand in a doorway so you can put your hands on the door frame to help you balance for as long as you can, working up to 60 seconds. When you can do this for 60 seconds, try exercise number 2.



2. Stand on your injured foot only and hold your arms across your chest with your eyes open. When you can do this for 60 seconds, try exercise number 3.



3. Stand on your injured foot only, hold your arms out to the sides and close your eyes. If you feel unsteady, stand in a doorway so you can put your hands on the door frame to help you. When you can do this for 60 seconds, try exercise number 4.

4. Stand on your injured foot only, hold your arms across your chest and close your eyes. Balance for as long as you can, working up to 60 seconds.



Stretching exercises should be continued on a daily basis and especially before and after physical activities to prevent reinjury. Even after your ankle feels better, continue with strengthening exercises and balance and control exercises several times a week to keep your ankles strong.

Sole Searching

Finding Strong Feet

Intrinsic muscles - what are they?

The intrinsic muscles in your feet are small muscles that live in the main part of your foot and between your toes. Their main job is controlling the motion of the feet, holding up your arches and helping with balance.

They are very important for people who are on their feet a lot or do sports that require a lot of foot strength, such as ballet and rock climbing. They are also important for trail runners and hikers as they rely on foot sensation to keep their balance when on uneven surfaces. Aside from that, they are useful for anyone who uses their feet to stay upright (most of us!) particularly on slippery or uneven surfaces.



They also have a role in controlling the arch of the foot. This is like a natural shock absorber and reduces impact on the whole body while running or walking. Keeping them strong can protect every weight bearing joint in the body!

What happens if they get weak?

If the foot intrinsics don't work as they should, they can stress the joints and ligaments under the foot. If this happens it can lead to injuries such as plantar fasciitis and bunions, along with ankle sprains. The main reason for weakness in the foot intrinsics is inactivity or underuse (like most muscles!) either walking infrequently, having your foot in a cast or always walking in shoes.



What can be done to strengthen them?

Take your shoes off! Of course, you need to have shoes on when walking or running outside, but when you're at home, walk around barefoot or in socks. This way you will use the muscles in your feet more. For a real work out, walk in bare feet on soft sand.

You can also exercise your toes - here are some ways you can challenge your intrinsic muscles:



Bring all your toes up, keep the big toe up and bring all the other toes down. To start with you might have to use our fingers to help, but the more you do it, the easier you'll find it. You can also do the opposite - pressing the big toe down and lifting the rest.

Try picking things up with your toes or simply try to spread and grip them!

