How to treat a muscle strain / tear

There is a basic treatment protocol that you can use to treat nearly any muscle strain or tear. Muscle tears can be graded from 0 to 5, but this is usually applied to elite sports performers. I'm going to simplify things and talk about Grade 1, 2, and 3 muscle tears.



I will talk specifically about:

- Grading muscle tears
- Recipe for treating muscle tears / strains
- The golden rules when doing strength training for an injured muscle

Grading Muscle Tears

Grade 1: You likely have a grade 1 muscle tear if you have some pain in the muscle when you use it, but you can nearly do everything as normal. You usually don't feel any pain when you rest it.

Grade 2: With a grade 2 tear you've torn a significant number of muscle fibres and there is usually quite a bit of swelling and bruising as well. You may have pain even when you're lying down or sitting still and it is usually quite painful when you try and use the muscle.

Grade 3: A grade 3 tear is a more serious one where you've torn more than 85% of the muscle fibres. There is usually a lot of swelling and bruising (but not always). If the muscle is fully torn through, you may not have much pain but you'll find that you can't use the muscles – there's just no power or strength in it. You may get an ache even while resting it.

Treating muscle tears / strains

Day 1: Apply the RICE regime. Rest the injured body part and apply ice and light compression while elevating it. This will help stop the internal bleeding and limit the swelling.

Day 2 to 5: Continue using ice as needed, but you should now start to gently move your injured muscle. DON'T stretch it! The injured muscle has to grow back together and you'll make your injury worse if you stretch it at this point. DO start to gently move it, but don't push into pain. Gentle movements will help it recover more quickly. Check out the video above for a detailed explanation on how to do this.

After day 5: You now have to slowly start strengthening the muscle back up. What you do for strength training and how heavy you start can vary dramatically depending on how badly you've torn your muscle. For instance, for severe quad strains I may first get a patient to just tense their quadriceps muscle with their leg straight (isometric contraction) and hover the straight leg 5cm off the bed while if it was only a mild quad strain, I may get them doing squats.

Some tried and tested rules when doing strength training for an injured muscle are:

1. Forget what you could do before your injury – you have to test what the muscle is capable of doing now and start there.
2. Don't push into pain. Especially during the first few weeks, you want the exercises to be totally pain free and also to not feel any increase in pain after doing your exercises.
3. Do not go back to doing your sport or fitness training if you've not done specific exercises to strengthen your injured muscle to the level that is needed for your sport. The strength training has to be a progressive programme that starts light but then increases in intensity so that it resembles what will be expected of your muscle when you play your normal sport. Grade 1 muscle tears take about 4 weeks to regain full strength while Grade 2 tears can take between 6 to 12 weeks.

Let me know if you have any questions. Need more help with your injury? You're welcome to consult me via online video link for an assessment of your injury and a bespoke treatment plan.

Kind regards,

Chas

Chas Staines BSc (Hons)
Sports and Exercise Therapist
CK Sports Injury Clinic