

RETURN TO PLAY WITH THE HELP OF YOUR SPORTS PHYSIOTHERAPIST



By D'Arcy Bain

The body is a wonderful self-sufficient, self-monitoring and self-healing organism. Healing times vary between athletes and nonathletes. A healthy athlete typically recovers more quickly. To foster the best environment for an athlete's healing, it is important to see a sports physiotherapist within minutes or days after the injury. Early intervention hastens the recovery process.

When given the range of a four-to-six-week recovery rate, supervised rehabilitation often brings that athlete closer to four weeks. Those two weeks mean a lot when an athlete wishes to return to play.

Strategies for Rehabilitation and Return to Play:

Sports physiotherapists study sports. They know the injury healing times and make rehabilitation plans. Plans involve the best healing environment by maintaining the athlete's cardio, strength, and over all joint athletic range of movement.

Early pain control by a sports physiotherapist can include an ice machine, compression techniques, elevation, supported rest, TENS, laser, acupuncture, and manual therapy techniques. Education about the injury ensures that the important milestones of healing are outlined so that athletes can self-monitor their recovery.

The next stage of rehabilitation involves supportive wraps, supportive taping, compression taping, kinesio taping that add to the assisted movement support, and gradual increase in weight bearing activities. Physiotherapists use therapeutic ultra-sound, muscle stimulators, shock wave, dry needling and interferential wave length treatment modalities in this stage of recovery.

For longer recovery times (over two-to-three weeks) the athlete must substitute aerobic activities to maintain their cardio fitness during rehabilitation. For lower extremity injuries an upper arm bike ergometer or swimming are good substitutes. For upper extremity injuries running, water running, or stationary bike riding maintains the athlete's cardio conditioning. Longer recovery times require the diet to be adjusted so that unwanted weight gain does not occur, due to inactivity.

In this stage of recovery, plans for higher-level athlete include imagery to enhance focusing, visualizing game situations, and studying game film to train reads and reactions to situations.

Equipment, such as a brace or supportive taping, help vulnerable ligaments (ankles, thumbs,

fingers, and wrists) from stress beyond their healing structural limits. This equipment prevents re-injury. Kinesiotaping can also be applied to assist movement for soft tissue injuries.

Athletes must complete their rehabilitation for strengthening, range of movement and be able to perform pain-free functional testing before they start in the controlled practice setting. Athletes start with therapeutic exercises that mimic the sport. Functional testing, before return to play, will have them skate, run, jump, cut, throw, or shoot independently to gauge if they can get into the team practice setting. Critical information is gained after a workout or practice by the sports physiotherapist to evaluate the injury and progress of tissue healing.

Practicing before they play allows them to gain confidence, to get used to better fitting equipment, new bracing or new supports to be worn.

The next stage is a graduated return to play.

Below are a few graduated return to play tips for various sports:

Shorter shifts. Play near the end of the game, or the period/quarter or when the opposition players are more tired is easier for the athlete.

Start the return to play against an easier team

Start hockey players on the power play, killing penalties or on a line with less pressure for them to compete.

For football—a special teams may provide a more controlled start.

For soccer—a position that involves less running position, such as in the back field may help assimilate the player back into team play.

When returning to play the injury should be re-evaluated during play, or right after, to ensure that the extra effort has not affected the injury recovery. There should be no pain, swelling, or bruising. Also, the warmth around a healing area should not increase.

A gradual return to activity is important so that the athlete will return and enjoy the sport for a long time to come. In later life, their weekend warrior injuries should not prevent them from a bike ride or game of catch with grandchildren.

Sports physiotherapists can help keep people be safely active and enjoy their fitness for years.

D'Arcy Bain is a physiotherapist at D'Arcy Bain Physiotherapy. You can find D'Arcy and many other great physiotherapists, in the Find a Physiotherapist section of our website at mbphysio.org.

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