

I Rolled My Ankle and It's Swollen on the Outside

Understanding ATFL Sprains (Lateral Ankle Sprain)

What Is Causing ATFL / Lateral Ankle Sprain Pain?

The anterior talofibular ligament (ATFL) is the most commonly injured ligament in the entire body. It connects the fibula to the talus on the outside of the ankle and tears when the foot rolls inward — the classic “twisted ankle” injury.

What Does It Feel Like?

- Pain and swelling on the outside of the ankle
- Bruising that may extend down into the foot
- Tenderness directly over the ligament, just below the outer ankle bone
- A feeling of the ankle “giving way”, especially on uneven ground
- Difficulty bearing weight, depending on how severe the tear is

What Causes It?

- Stepping onto an uneven surface or into a hole
- Landing awkwardly from a jump
- Quick direction changes during sport
- Wearing unsupportive footwear
- A history of prior ankle sprains, which significantly raises the risk of re-injury

What Makes It Worse?

- Walking on uneven ground before the ligament has healed
- Skipping rehab and returning to activity too soon
- Repeated ankle-rolling episodes, which lead to chronic instability over time
- Ignoring persistent swelling or a sense of instability

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Inability to take four steps immediately after the injury
- Point tenderness directly over the bone rather than the ligament
- Visible deformity
- These findings suggest a possible fracture and warrant imaging

The Good News

This is one of the most common injuries physical therapy treats, and outcomes are excellent. Early protection followed by balance, proprioception, and strengthening work is also the single best way to prevent this from turning into chronic ankle instability.

Mild sprains typically resolve in **1 to 2 weeks**, moderate sprains in 3 to 6 weeks, and severe (full) tears in 8 to 12 weeks with a structured PT program.

This information is for general educational purposes only and is not a substitute for a professional evaluation. Call us today — we have immediate openings with no waitlist.

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