**How to Heal, Protect, and Strengthen a Strained Calf Muscle**

**Pulled calf muscle**

A pulled calf muscle refers to [strains](https://www.healthline.com/health/strains) within the two muscles in the lower back of your leg that make up your calf. They’re called the [gastrocnemius](https://www.healthline.com/human-body-maps/gastrocnemius-muscle) and [soleus](https://www.healthline.com/human-body-maps/soleus-muscle) muscles. When a strain occurs, muscle fibres are torn to some degree.

A pulled calf muscle happens when your internal muscles are overstretched from exercise. This is a common injury, especially among athletes and runners. Pulled calf muscles may be chronic from long-term injury or acute from brief overpulling.

**Pulled calf muscle symptoms**

Symptoms of a pulled calf muscle can depend on the severity of the injury. A mild strain can leave you [with pain](https://www.healthline.com/health/calf-pain) and feelings of pulling within the lower half of your leg. You can still walk with a mild strain, but it may be uncomfortable.

Other signs of a pulled calf muscle include:

* mild swelling
* redness
* bruising
* inability to stand up on the ball of your foot

A severe pull in your calf muscles can leave you with feelings of sharp pain. It can also affect your mobility, making you unable to walk.

**Talking with your doctor**

A pulled calf muscle is diagnosed with a symptom check. Your doctor will also look for signs such as swelling and bruising. They may even have you do mild stretches while they look at your calf muscle to see if it’s pulled.

**Treating a pulled calf muscle**

A mild calf muscle strain may resolve within in a few days. In the meantime, you can use the following home treatments:

* **Ice or cold compresses**. Wrap these in a soft cloth and place on your calf for 10 minutes. You can repeat the process every hour or two for the first three days of your injury if you still have swelling.
* [**Heat pads**](https://amzn.to/2RHESSa). Make sure the setting is on low and that you do not fall asleep with a heating pad on your leg. Try not to use a heating pad right away as the heat may cause your calf to swell more.
* [**Leg wraps**](https://amzn.to/2RD5nrP). These can also help reduce swelling and increase mobility.
* **Prop your leg up above heart level**. This will decrease swelling.
* **Rest for at least a full day**. Only return to exercise and your normal activities after your calf is completely free from pain and swelling.
* **Take over-the-counter pain medications**. Unless otherwise instructed by your doctor, you can take acetaminophen or ibuprofen for pain relief. Ibuprofen is also a [nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug](https://www.healthline.com/health/pain-relief/otc-anti-inflammatories) that reduces swelling.

If your symptoms do not improve within a few days, you might have a more serious calf injury. More severe cases may require surgery or physical therapy. Your doctor may also prescribe stronger pain medications — these are only taken temporarily and should not be used more often than as prescribed.

**Pulled calf muscle recovery time**

In total, it usually takes up to three days for a pulled calf muscle to start feeling better. But a full recovery may take up to six weeks. Severe swelling can make any pain and discomfort last a bit longer. Walking on recovering calf muscles can also increase recovery time.

If you must have surgery for a severe pull in your calf muscle, it may take several weeks or months before you fully recover.

**Torn calf muscle complications**

[Prompt treatment](https://www.healthline.com/health/muscle-strain-treatment) is important for your overall recovery. While it may be difficult to rest your affected leg for a few days, moving around too soon can make the muscle strain worse.

There is also a risk for a recurring calf muscle strain within one to two weeks of the initial injury. About [30 percent Trusted Source](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3846951/) of people with muscle injuries end up having repeated injuries. The chances are greater among athletes who continue to play the same sports and people using the same muscles repeatedly. Allowing yourself enough recovery time is critical to your calf muscle treatment.

It is also possible to develop a herniated muscle as a result of a torn calf. This occurs when your calf muscle protrudes underneath your skin, creating a visible bump. While not necessarily painful, this lump must be treated by a doctor to avoid further muscle injury.

**Stretches for a pulled calf muscle**

While you should not resume normal activities until your calf muscle heals, there are some stretches that can complement rest and other treatment measures. Stretching not only helps with recovery of your affected muscles, but it can also help your knee and ankle joints remain stabilized and mobile.

Ask your doctor about the following exercises you can try at home during your calf muscle recovery:

* **Chair stretches.** Sitting in a stable chair, bend and straighten the knee of your affected leg for 10 repetitions at a time.
* **Wall stretches.** Face a wall and put your arms out so your hands are firmly against the wall at shoulder level. Straighten your affected leg with your heel pressed firmly into the ground. Then step your other leg forward so it’s at a 90-degree angle. You can hold this position for 30 seconds at a time for 4 reps. Repeat the process as often as you feel comfortable throughout the day.
* **Floor stretches.** Sit on the floor with your affected leg straight. Flex your foot and set your heel firmly into the floor. Gently press your toes towards you for 5 seconds in this position, repeating the stretch up to 10 times.
* **Standing stretches.** Grip the back of a sturdy chair and lift yourself on the balls of your feet for 5 seconds. Repeat four times each session, up to twice a day.

**Preventing muscle strains**

Once you have had a pulled calf muscle, you are at much greater risk for getting another strain of this type in the future. You can help prevent muscle strains and pulled calf muscles by:

* warming up for at least five minutes before exercise, including deep stretches
* stretching your legs before exercising
* cooling down for five minutes after you work out
* stretching your muscles again for five minutes after you have cooled down

You can also prevent pulled calf muscles by avoiding strenuous activities you are not ready for. It is important to work your way up to more intense exercises gradually. A doctor, personal trainer, or physical therapist can offer recommendations for taking your workouts to the next level when it is appropriate.

**The takeaway**

A pulled calf muscle is a common injury that is easily treated at home unless complications arise. Make sure to follow your doctor’s recommendations and let yourself rest to prevent any further injury.