TAC information for people with soft tissue injuries

Looking after yourself and your injury
Getting moving again

Soft tissue injuries
The aim of this booklet is to give you the information and practical advice you need to help you recover from your soft tissue injury. With this booklet's help you can work with your health care professionals and the TAC to manage your pain, get moving again and return to the activities you enjoy.
The TAC pays for treatment and support services for people injured in transport accidents. A common form of injury in transport accidents is a soft tissue injury.

A soft tissue injury is an injury to a muscle, ligament, tendon or piece of cartilage. The injury occurs when the cartilage tears or the muscle, ligament or tendon over-stretches in a way it’s not used to, as in the jolt of a car accident. The injury also occurs when a blow from an accident causes the muscle, ligament or tendon to tighten and compress (become smaller). A soft tissue injury is quite different from a fracture, which is an injury to a bone.

Soft tissue injuries can be painful and frustrating, affecting just about every aspect of your everyday life. They can make it difficult to work, to exercise and to socialise. They can affect such basic things as sitting down or getting to sleep. A side effect of such injuries can be feelings of depression and isolation as people wonder if they will ever get better.

About soft tissue injuries

• Soft tissue injuries affect muscles, ligaments, tendons and cartilage and include strains, sprains, bruises and tears.
• Soft tissue injuries can cause other problems such as headaches, dizziness or pain in the arm or leg.
• Unlike fractures, they don’t show up on an x-ray.

Getting better

Recovery from soft tissue injuries can depend on a number of factors, including your age, your lifestyle, your general fitness and your type of injury. There is general agreement, however, that you will get better faster if you get moving again and return to your daily activities as soon as possible.

There is a range of health care professionals who can help get you moving again. Your doctor may recommend a physiotherapist, chiropractor or osteopath who works in your local area.

Make sure that your doctor and your health care professional talk to one another about your treatment and your progress. The TAC can consider paying for your consultations with health care professionals.

As you get moving, you may have pain at times. Not all pain is harmful, and it may help to keep moving despite it. Talk to you doctor or health care professional about ways to modify what you are doing to help you keep moving, even if there is some pain.

Remember, as you get better and get moving again you will have good days and bad days. This is normal.

Most people are much better within three months. If your injury hasn’t improved within three months, talk to your doctor or health care professional about the steps you need to take to get moving again.
Kylie could barely move her neck after her accident and found it difficult to care for her two school-aged children. She saw a doctor who explained what whiplash was and prescribed painkillers. She took the painkillers, but when they wore off she felt very stiff and sore. She felt overwhelmed because the housework piled up and her pain made her feel depressed and frustrated. She stopped seeing her friends and playing with her children. She spent most of her time resting in bed. After two weeks, she had not improved. She was missing her friends and had lost a lot of confidence.

Kylie called the TAC to make a claim and made an appointment to see her physiotherapist. Together, she and her physiotherapist developed a program to get her moving again. Kylie then discussed the program with her doctor.

Kylie started her program slowly, doing a little more exercise each day. Exercising regularly caused some discomfort, but she didn’t feel any sharp pain and she was improving so she persisted.

Careful not to overdo it, Kylie divided her housework into small, manageable segments. She avoided lifting things she couldn’t manage, opting to carry two small loads of washing to the line, rather than one full basket of wet clothes. She asked a member of her family to help out occasionally with the housework. She walked the children to school even though she was in some discomfort. A couple of times a week she arranged to meet her friends for coffee while the children were at school.

Now Kylie feels happier because she is able to play with her children again and she regularly sees her friends. Although she still feels some discomfort, she has adjusted her activities to resume her normal, everyday life.
Talking to your health care professional

The hints below are designed to help you benefit more from your consultations with health care professionals. You may wish to take this booklet to your next consultation to discuss these hints.

- Soft tissue injuries have no quick fix. Be prepared to talk about a gradual program of movement that will assist the body’s natural healing process.
- Monitor how the injury affects your work/study, sleeping, shopping, driving, sitting down etc. This will give your health care professionals a better idea of how to help you.
- Different exercises suit different people, so ask which ones are best for your injury and your lifestyle. Ask for a program that you can do easily around the house and at work.
- Ask for a general fitness program. Improving your fitness will make you feel better about yourself which will help you in your recovery.
- Ask how you can safely return to the activities you enjoyed before you were injured. Do you enjoy walking? Ball sports? Riding a bike? Swimming? Even if you are restricted and only able to participate for a short period, you will find this sort of enjoyable exercise very therapeutic.

Getting moving again

Motivation

You can help motivate yourself to return to exercise by setting yourself some short-term goals. Exercise because you want to play in the park with your children as soon as you can. Exercise because you want to attend the party or wedding you’ve been invited to. Exercise because you want to catch up with your friends at the shopping centre or movies next week. Talk to your health care professional about how they can help you achieve your short-term goals.

Pace yourself

Start your activities slowly, even exercising only a few minutes to gradually build up your strength. Move smoothly and slowly, without sudden jerks. Don’t worry if you’re sore to start with, it’s normal – hurt is not the same as harm and soreness will normally pass.

Try to do a little bit more each day, but remember, don’t push yourself too hard, too soon. If you do your injury may flare up. While exercise is vital in the recovery process, it’s time to stop if you feel a sharp pain or you have the strong sensation that ‘something just isn’t right’.

If you do experience pain when you exercise, talk to your health care professional. They will help you achieve the levels of movement, rest or medication that are appropriate to your injury.
Handy hints for managing your injury

- Reduce the weight in your shopping bags and always use a shopping trolley to carry bags from the supermarket to your car.
- If you are carrying shopping bags, make sure the weight is distributed evenly.
- Don’t try and do all your housework at once. For example, carry two small basket-loads of washing to the line instead of one big load.
- Only lift or carry what you can manage.
- Avoid putting items on the floor that you will have to pick up later.
- Adjust your desk and chair so you are comfortable when you read, work or study.
- Don’t stay in the same position for more than 20 minutes. Move about. If you work in an office, get up occasionally to stretch and walk. Do your exercises in the ad breaks when you watch TV.
- Look for opportunities to walk rather than drive. Leave the car at home and try walking to the shops, for example, or to the bus stop.

Measuring your progress

Measure your progress based on what you can do rather than how much pain you have. Try keeping a diary of key daily activities that you are having difficulties with. Keep a record of these activities such as distance walked, hours sitting, number of times per night or week that sleep is interrupted. You are getting better if you are able to do daily activities for a longer period of time. Even if there is still some pain or discomfort, a longer walk or an extra half hour studying on the computer means you are improving.

The basic questions to ask yourself are:

- Am I able to do more of my everyday activities than I was a month ago?
- Is my treatment making a difference?

If you answered ‘no’ to either of these questions, it may be time to consider other options. (See ‘If you’re not getting better’ section on page 7).

Ask your health care professionals for more advice on how to measure your progress and when they think you should feel better.
Getting back to work

Returning to work means you are getting back to your normal routine and managing your injury rather than letting it dominate your life.

Here are some hints for managing your return to work:

- Find out if your workplace has an Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) representative and/or Human Resources officer who can help you get back into the swing of things. If not, find out who is the best person in your workplace to talk to about your injury and your return to work.

- Call your employer regularly and let them know how you are progressing. Let them know that you may be able to return to work before you have fully recovered from your injuries.

- Talk to your employer about returning part-time, or on modified duties. If your job involves any physical exertion that is now unsuitable for you, ask whether there are other duties available.

- If you return to a job in which some lifting is unavoidable, don’t try to lift items you can’t manage.

- If your job involves a lot of sitting, reorganise your schedule so that you can get up each hour to walk and stretch. Remember, you may become stiff and sore if you sit for long periods.

- Talk to your employer about taking time out during the day to do your exercise program. Explain that the program will help you return to full duties sooner.

If you are having difficulty returning to work contact the TAC – we may be able to help.

Try not to worry

Worrying about your injury is natural, especially if you feel that you’re not getting better and you think you may not be able to work for some time. Unfortunately, worry can actually prolong or aggravate your injury by increasing the tension in your body. The more tense you are, the harder it is to move freely – and that’s the opposite of what you’re aiming for. If you don’t know any good relaxation techniques, ask your health care professional for advice. Your doctor may recommend breathing techniques, for example.
Don’t let your injury chain you to the house. Try to keep your regular appointments. If, for example, you see friends once a week to go to the cinema or a café, make sure you keep doing that.

You can also combat undue worry by adopting a positive, pro-active attitude. Staying at home waiting for your injury to heal simply doesn’t work. Don’t let your injury chain you to the house. Try to keep your regular appointments. If, for example, you see friends once a week to go to the cinema or a café, make sure you keep doing that. If you normally cheer your children on when they play sport, make every effort to be there next weekend.

### If you’re not getting better

Most people with a soft tissue injury will notice significant improvement within three months. They may still feel stiff and sore occasionally but they can see that they are ‘on the mend’. If you have made no real progress after three months, ask your health care professionals if they believe you are progressing. Together, you may need to discuss other options. Your doctor may refer you to a specialist.

Life can be difficult if pain is getting you down and there appears to be no improvement. Maybe your exercises don’t seem to be working and you seem to need medication to get through the day. In such cases it is natural to feel discouraged and frustrated and in some cases these ‘down’ feelings may develop into a more serious depression. The good news is that help is available. If you feel depressed, contact your doctor. They may refer you to a specialist such as a psychologist. The TAC can consider paying for psychological treatment.

| Do deal with the pain by being positive, staying active or staying at work. |
| Do ask your health care professionals for an exercise program that suits your needs and type of injury. |
| Do think about the activities you enjoy and exercise so you can return to them sooner. |
| Do start your exercises slowly, pace yourself and measure your progress. |
| Do expect good and bad days. |
| Do ask your health care professional for techniques to help you relax. |
| Don’t rely on rest alone and wait for the pain to get better. |
| Don’t think that a little bit of pain means further damage – it doesn’t. |
| Don’t rush into your exercise program and go too hard, too soon. |
| Don’t rely on medication alone to get you through the day. |
| Don’t keep doing the same exercises every week without some goals to work towards. |

---

The good news is that help is available. If you feel depressed, contact your doctor.
After persisting with his exercise program, John felt better and arranged with his employer to return to work.

John’s story

John is an office worker who hurt his lower back in a car accident eight weeks ago. John is married with three children and was unable to work for three weeks after the accident.

Immediately after the accident, John saw his doctor. She diagnosed the soft tissue injury and told him to rest for two days, use an icepack to reduce inflammation and take tablets for the pain. John didn’t have an icepack but achieved the same effect by using frozen peas wrapped in a damp towel.

John called the TAC, lodged a claim and found out which treatment and support services the TAC could fund. He called his employer and explained that he would update them regularly on his progress.

Shortly after the accident, John saw an osteopath that his doctor had recommended. The osteopath gave him an exercise program to stretch and strengthen his back and encouraged him to walk gently for fifteen minutes a day. Instead, John walked for forty minutes and his injury flared up. He needed to rest again.

At this stage, John was worried about when he would recover. As the bread winner of the house he was worried about when he could get back to work. John also felt frustrated because he was confined to the house and couldn’t even watch his sons train and play soccer. After three days of rest, he contacted his osteopath to make sure he fully understood his exercise program.

John was far more careful the next time. He started his exercise program gently. He walked for fifteen minutes regularly to the sports oval to watch his sons at soccer training. He walked to the supermarket when the family only needed a few items and he could carry a light bag. He saw his osteopath again and let her know how he was progressing.

After persisting with his exercise program, John felt better and arranged with his employer to return to work. For the first two weeks John worked part time and did a few hours a day in the office. He returned gradually to full time work and resumed his normal duties. Today, John continues with his exercise program to maintain his fitness and strength and enjoys kicking the soccer ball with his children in the backyard.
Contact us

Telephone
8.30am to 5.30pm, Monday to Friday
1300 654 329 (local call)
1800 332 556 (toll-free outside the Melbourne metropolitan area)

Address
60 Brougham Street
Geelong VIC 3220

Mailing address
TAC
PO Box 742
Geelong VIC 3220

Website
www.tac.vic.gov.au

©Copyright Transport Accident Commission, 2012

For information about the TAC in your own language, call one of the numbers listed here

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Tiếng Việt</th>
<th>Ellēniká</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1300 138 639</td>
<td>1300 139 074</td>
<td>1300 138 642</td>
<td>1300 139 076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>廣東話</td>
<td>1300 138 640</td>
<td>Italiano</td>
<td>Türkçe</td>
<td>All other languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1300 138 643</td>
<td>1300 139 073</td>
<td>1300 139 075</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polski</td>
<td>1300 139 072</td>
<td>普通话</td>
<td>Hrvatski</td>
<td>1300 138 641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1300 139 071</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>