

MUSCLE STRAIN — LEG & CALF

Calf (Gastrocnemius) Strain

Understanding your injury and getting back to full speed

WHAT IS IT?

The gastrocnemius is the large, visible calf muscle crossing both the knee and ankle. Its inner (medial) head is the classic site of “tennis leg” — a sudden strain during push-off with the knee straight.

A **strain** means muscle fibers were overstretched. We grade strains I–III: **Grade I** — mild, microscopic fiber injury; **Grade II** — moderate, a partial tear with strength loss; **Grade III** — severe, complete disruption.

HOW IT HAPPENS

A lunge or push-off with the knee extended and ankle flexed — tennis, basketball, hill running; also simply pushing off a curb in patients over 40.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

Sudden sharp pain in the inner calf — often described as being kicked or shot — with difficulty pushing off, swelling, and bruising that drifts toward the ankle over days.

HOW LONG RECOVERY TAKES

- **Grade I:** 1–3 weeks
- **Grade II:** 4–8 weeks
- **Grade III:** 8–12 weeks

TREATMENT

Almost all muscle strains heal without surgery. For the first 72 hours: relative rest, ice 15–20 minutes several times daily, compression, and *gentle* motion — complete rest slows healing. Then a progressive program: pain-free motion → isometrics → strengthening → **eccentric loading** (strengthening the muscle while it lengthens — the phase that prevents re-injury) → sport-specific work.

Early gentle ankle motion, then progressive calf raises (double-leg → single-leg → loaded), with a heel lift in the shoe early on for comfort.

RETURNING TO SPORT

Return when strength is at least **90% of the other side**, motion is full and pain-free, and you can perform your sport’s movements at full speed without hesitation. Returning before the muscle is re-strengthened is the main cause of re-injury.

PREVENTING THE NEXT ONE

Calf strengthening and stretching, gradual return to explosive push-off sports, and adequate warm-up.

WHEN TO CALL US

One-sided calf swelling, tightness, and warmth that worsens — especially without a clear injury — can be a blood clot (DVT): seek same-day care. Also return promptly if you cannot push off at all (possible Achilles rupture).

CALL THE OFFICE RIGHT AWAY

Pain not controlled by medication, fever over 101.5°F, spreading redness or warmth, or new numbness or weakness. Direct office line (513) 441-5639; after hours (513) 354-3700.



SCAN FOR THE LATEST VERSION ONLINE

robertpettitmd.com/handouts/calf-strain.pdf

This handout is for general patient education and does not replace personalized medical advice. Always follow the specific instructions given by Dr. Pettit and your care team.