

MUSCLE STRAIN — SPINE & CORE

Oblique / Intercostal Strain (Side Strain)

Understanding your injury and getting back to full speed

WHAT IS IT?

The abdominal obliques and the intercostal muscles between the ribs rotate and side-bend the trunk. A 'side strain' is a hallmark injury of rotational athletes — batters, pitchers, golfers, and rowers.

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 forceful trunk rotation — swinging a bat or club, a hard pitch, rowing — usually on the side opposite the throwing arm (lead side).

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

Sudden sharp pain in the side of the trunk or lower ribs during rotation, pain with coughing, sneezing, laughing, or deep breathing, tenderness between or below the ribs.

HOW LONG RECOVERY TAKES

- **Grade I:** 1–3 weeks
- **Grade II:** 3–6 weeks
- **Grade III:** 6–10 weeks — professional baseball data average roughly 4–6 weeks missed for oblique injuries

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.

Pain-free trunk motion first, then progressive anti-rotation and rotational core work, finishing with sport-specific swinging/throwing progressions — return too early and recurrence is common.

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

Rotational core conditioning in preseason, gradual buildup of swing/throw volume, warm-up before maximal-effort rotation.

WHEN TO CALL US

Pain with breathing after direct trauma may indicate a rib injury; fever or chest symptoms are not part of a muscle strain — call if these occur.

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/oblique-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.