Ankle Swelling and Function after Sprain

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Treatment for ankle sprain is often directed at reducing painful swelling. The idea is to restore function by limiting inflammation. However this treatment approach has been called into question by a new study.

Thirty-six men and women with a recent ankle sprain were in this study. All were seen within five days of the injury. Ankle swelling was measured and questions were asked about pain and function. The results showed no link between swelling and function.

The researchers were surprised by the findings. They offered several possible reasons for the results:

• Swelling may change over the course of day; perhaps time of day the ankle is measured makes a difference.
• Measures taken included the foot and the ankle; this might not show just the ankle swelling and function.
• Patients may have misjudged their actual performance; perhaps they could do more than they thought.

The authors aren't ready to say reduction of swelling isn't needed after ankle sprain. It may not improve function right away, but limiting inflammation may have other important long-term effects. There may be joint damage and changes in how the muscles work around the joint.

Future studies may need to look at how much pain and swelling are present compared to function over time.