

Q and A: To brace or not to brace

May 3 2022, by Cynthia Weiss



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DEAR MAYO CLINIC: I love being active, playing tennis, bowling, hiking and shooting hoops with my grandkids. I have arthritis in my ankle and wonder if wearing a brace would prevent injury and maybe even relieve the aches and pains I have after activities.

ANSWER: Braces, not only for the ankle, but also the [knee](#) and wrist, provide support, as well as compression and warmth. They also can help with pain and healing if you've experienced an injury. Often immobilizing and supporting a joint can calm it and relieve pain.

Studies have shown that ankle [braces](#) can reduce injuries and don't interfere with performance. You may have seen football defensive linemen wearing sleeves or even larger braces around their knees that are designed to prevent injury. A wrist [brace](#) can provide support and alleviate symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome.

Any athletic trainer, physical therapist, or [sports medicine](#) or orthopedic health care professional can make recommendations for your situation. As with any joint issue, it's best to address it early to prevent further injury and let you continue participating in the activities you enjoy most.

Braces range from a simple neoprene sleeve to a complex hinged device. A wide variety of braces are available over the counter at pharmacies and sporting goods stores, and online. It's important to choose a brace that meshes best with the level of activity you want to maintain or regain.

For example, a simple neoprene sleeve on your ankle would be a good solution for lower stress, [everyday activities](#) like going for a long walk. But if you're taking activity to the next level, such as yardwork or walking on uneven terrain, you may want to use a wrap-around ankle brace with Velcro straps that allow you to adjust the tightness. People involved in higher-intensity activities, such as basketball, volleyball or tennis, may find a lace-up brace with adjustable straps to be the best choice.

If you've injured your ankle, like twisting it as you step off a curb, wearing a brace after the accident can provide support and stability. It also will give you confidence that your ankle will support you. But as the

injury heals, you should gradually work away from wearing a more supportive brace to a lighter brace and then to not wearing a brace at all or only occasionally. This lets the ligaments and muscles around your ankle naturally strengthen and heal through lower-intensity everyday activities.

You may want to continue bracing for more strenuous activities, like working out, shoveling snow or running. If you're an athlete, save the brace for competitions and practices.

Many of the same reasons to brace an ankle apply to the knee, too. However, injuries that cause knee pain often are related to muscle control at the hip or [ankle](#), so bracing the knee potentially doesn't have the same effect on healing. That's why it's important to consult with your health care team on the best way to treat a knee injury or pain.

If you have [early onset](#), mild arthritis in your knee, a neoprene sleeve can provide support, compression and warmth. These simple braces can be worn as long as they continue to provide relief. Some athletes wear a sleeve or tights that go below the knee for compression and comfort.

However, if you've injured your knee, such as a sprained or torn ACL, rely on your surgeon's guidance. Typically, a complex knee brace is worn for the first year. After that, a brace usually isn't needed for less stressful activities. Keep in mind it can take up to two years to return to baseline stability following an ACL injury. Once you're back to full function, you can stop wearing a brace.

Wrist braces range from a simple Ace bandage or wrap to a hard plastic splint that stabilizes the thumb, as well. Basic braces provide support and compression for comfort and injury prevention. A hard-shell brace often is used for general sprains and pain. Those with carpal tunnel syndrome may wear one of these braces at night to prevent them from curling their

wrists under as they sleep. This prevents pressure on the carpal tunnel. Certain sprains or breaks might require a spica splint, which is a special type of orthopedic splint that immobilizes the thumb but allows the other fingers and wrist to move easily.

Braces can be used as part of your overall active lifestyle. Finding the right brace for your activity can relieve aches and pain, prevent [injury](#) and be the perfect complement to staying active. Combine the support of a brace with general strengthening to maximize your level of activity.

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