

12 Ways to Build Ankle Strength for Top Performance



By Stana Landon
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What's in the ankle?

A physically active body must achieve a stable balance around each active joint for top performance. Ligaments connect the bones to each other, and provide much of the joint's stability. Muscles are connected to bone by tendons, allowing for movement at the joints.

Although the ligaments connecting the bones in the ankle are necessary for proper function, there are several muscles that also help support the ankle during any type of activity. Building strength and proprioception, or special awareness, in these muscles helps to prevent injury and improve performance.

Why is it important to keep the ankle strong?

When an athlete performs any movement--whether running or jumping--the ankle and surrounding muscles are put under a great deal of stress. If the ankle musculature is strong, the athlete can withstand greater force before an injury is sustained. In addition to decreasing ankle injuries, strengthening lower leg muscles will help prevent chronic conditions such as shin splints and Achilles tendonitis.

Proprioception

Proprioception is the body's ability to realize its place in space. If an athlete is moving into a position that could sprain his or her ankle, increased proprioception can decrease the risk by alerting the athlete to the danger. Proprioception can also increase an athlete's performance. An athlete with superior balance and awareness will be able to control his or her body more effectively. This is especially true in sports like basketball and soccer, but valuable in all sports or training. Proprioceptive training is done with balance exercises.

Balance Training

1. **Standing on one leg:** Hold for 30 seconds, working up to one minute per leg.
2. **Balance and catch:** Standing on one leg, catch and throw a ball with a partner. Make certain to throw the ball right, left, high, low. Perform three sets of 30.
3. **One leg mini squats:** On one leg do a half squat with the opposite leg out front for 10 reps, out to the side for 10 reps and behind for 10 reps. Repeat three times.

Strengthening

The ankle can be strengthened in several ways. The first exercise uses thera-band for resisted range of motion. Thera-band can be purchased at a medical supply store. When performing the following exercises, place the band around the top of the foot and curl the toes at the end of the movement to work the internal muscles of the foot. Perform three sets of 20 in each direction.

Inversion



Eversion



Dorsiflexion



Plantar Flexion



The second way to strengthen the muscles that surround the ankle is through a calf raise. Calf raises should be done both seated and standing to strengthen both calf muscles and the Achilles tendon. Perform 3 sets of 20.

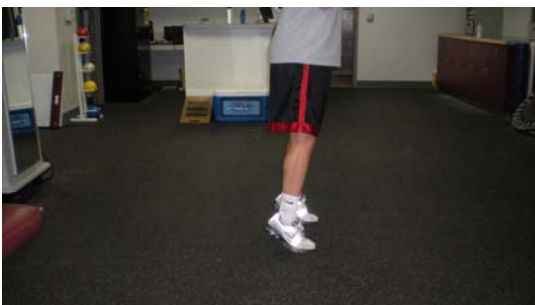
The third strengthening exercise are plyometric workouts. Plyometric training uses jumping type movements to strengthen muscles and make them more explosive. Perform each exercise 10 to 15 times.

Scissor hops: Begin in a lunge position. Jump and switch feet in mid-air landing with the opposite foot forward.





Standing squat jumps: Begin in a quarter squat position. Jump from that position and land softly.



Bounding: On the toes, take large bounding steps in at about 50 percent of running maximum speed. One repetition should be about 50 feet.

Use these tips to keep your ankles strong and prevent injury for your best athletic performance yet.

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Stana Landon has been a certified athletic trainer for eight years. She is also a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist, recognized by the NSCA. She was employed as the Head Athletic Trainer at Eastern Oregon University and for VibrantCare Rehabilitation prior to her current position as an Assistant Athletic Trainer at University of Puget Sound. Stana received her Bachelor's degree from University of Montana-Western in Environmental Science/Biology and Sports Medicine. She received her Master's degree in Physical Education and Athletic Training from Eastern Oregon University. Stana is currently enrolled in a Doctoral program in Education from Walden University. She enjoys all running, biking, and most outdoor activities.