If you’ve ever tried to define sprains and strains but can’t quite identify the difference between the two, you’re not alone. These two terms are often used interchangeably to describe overstretching or tearing of soft tissues in and around your joints. There is a key difference, and knowing what that is can help you differentiate between joint sprains and strains.

**Symptoms**

A joint sprain is the overstretching or tearing of ligaments. Ligaments are the bands of tissue that connect two bones together in a joint. The most common location for a sprain is the ankle joint.

A joint strain is the overstretching or tearing of muscles or tendons. Tendons are the dense fibrous cords of tissue that connect bones to muscles. The most common locations for a muscle strain are the hamstring muscle and the lower back.

The symptoms of a sprain and a strain are very similar. That’s because the injuries themselves are very similar. It’s no wonder the two conditions are frequently confused.

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| **Common symptoms of sprains** | **Common symptoms of strains** |
| • bruising  • pain around the affected joint  • swelling  • limited flexibility  • difficulty using the joint’s full range of motion | • muscle spasm  • pain around the affected joint  • swelling  • limited flexibility  • difficulty using the joint’s full range of motion |

The main difference is that with a sprain you may have bruising around the affected joint, whereas with a strain, you may have spasms in the affected muscle.

**Causes**

Our bodies work hard day after day, so an occasional strain or sprain isn’t uncommon. Certain situations make you more likely to injure your joints. These include:

* athletic activities or exercise, including running or jogging
* accidents, such as falling or slipping
* lifting heavy objects
* overexerting yourself
* sitting or standing in an awkward position
* prolonged repetitive motion