

The Serious Injury Checklist

12 Questions To Ask About Your Injury

Hi! I'm Dr. David! Thank you for signing up for The Serious Injury Checklist! I'm excited to offer my thoughts on ways to tell if your injury is potentially serious. Regardless of whether it occurred in sports, exercise, work or in your personal life, you probably want to know if you should see your doctor, go to an emergency room or urgent care facility or even an orthopedic surgeon.



I can't give you specific advice because I have not had the privilege of seeing you as a patient, examining your injury and reviewing your x-rays or MRIs. I do think that this checklist can at least provide you some guidance to help you decide if you should see a doctor.

I wrote this checklist based on my experience both in my practice and through my online and social media work. In over a decade of working with athletes and active people in my practice, I've seen many thousands of patients in my clinic. Some of them came in within hours of the injury, and occasionally I find people who might have gotten better on their own without seeing a doctor.

On the other hand, I see patients all the time who waited many weeks, months or even years before they saw me or any medical professional. When I ask them why they waited so long, they often respond, "I thought if I rested it for a little while, it would eventually get better. One day I realized that I wasn't getting better."

On my website, I get hundreds of questions every week from readers all over the world. About half of those questions essentially boil down to one basic concept: Do I need to see a doctor?

For these reasons, I decided to create this checklist. I want to help you decide if you should seek out the advice of a doctor, surgeon, physical therapist or other healthcare professional. Answer the questions in the checklist, and then read the pages that follow to learn why those signs and symptoms potentially represent a serious injury.

Hopefully your knee, shoulder, elbow, hip, ankle or any other bone or joint injury is not a big deal! Asking yourself these simple questions can help you decide what you could do next.

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Consider using this list to decide if you should see your primary care provider, an orthopedic surgeon or another sports medicine physician for your injury. Remember that this list of questions is not comprehensive. There can be other signs and symptoms that justify seeing a healthcare professional for a shoulder, knee or other injury. Plus, some of these questions might not apply to every injury and situation. If you are concerned about your injury, seeing a doctor can be a good first step.

Question	Answer
Is the injured body part crooked or out of place?	Yes ____ No ____
Can you bear weight on your leg?	Yes ____ No ____
Can you lift your arm?	Yes ____ No ____
Can you bend the joint?	Yes ____ No ____
Is it much more swollen than the opposite side?	Yes ____ No ____
Is your pain getting better?	Yes ____ No ____
Are ice, compression wraps or bandages helping?	Yes ____ No ____
Are over-the-counter medications helping?	Yes ____ No ____
Did resting or modifying your activities help?	Yes ____ No ____
Is the injury keeping you from sleeping?	Yes ____ No ____
Can you play your sport as well as you would like?	Yes ____ No ____
Can you exercise as well as you would like?	Yes ____ No ____

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Is the injured body part crooked or out of place?

This is probably the most obvious sign that an injury is serious. If the leg, ankle, forearm or any other bone is deformed or crooked, it's likely broken. Or if your shoulder, kneecap, a finger or any other joint in the body is clearly out of place, it can be a good idea to see a doctor. In fact, going to an emergency room where a doctor can put the bone or joint back into place under sedation to minimize pain can be a necessary step. Plus the emergency room physician can put your arm in a sling or leg in a splint to protect it until you see an orthopedic surgeon.



Can you bear weight on your leg?

One of the concerns for a fracture of the foot or ankle is extreme pain when you try to bear weight. It's true that ankle sprains and other injuries can cause pain, but extreme pain when you try to put some weight on that leg can justify going to an emergency department, urgent care center or an orthopedic surgeon to get x-rays and find out if you broke a bone.

Can you lift your arm?

Often pain can limit your ability to lift your arm, especially overhead. That pain alone can justify seeing a doctor. Occasionally, though, you might have significant weakness or even a complete lack of ability to lift your arm up or away from your body on your own, unrelated to the pain. That weakness could signify a muscle or other serious soft tissue injury.

Can you bend the joint?

As in the prior example, pain can often limit your ability to bend your knee or other body parts. Sometimes, though, there are injured structures that can prevent you from flexing or extending that body part unrelated to pain. A good example is a knee injury where a

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teenage patient cannot fully straighten the knee, even if he or she tries to force it straight. Often he or she has torn the meniscus inside the knee in such a way that it blocks motion of the knee.

Is it much more swollen than the opposite side?

Swelling is normal after many musculoskeletal injuries. Where swelling might become concerning is when it causes the joint to be significantly worse than the opposite side. If your knee or ankle is much more swollen than the uninjured knee or ankle, it could be a good idea to find out if there is a fracture or torn ligament or tendon causing that degree of swelling.



Is your pain getting better?

Often waiting 24 or 48 hours to see if your pain and other symptoms improve is reasonable. Avoiding activities that cause pain can decrease stress on the injured area. If that step is enough to overcome the pain, then you potentially avoid seeing a doctor. On the other hand, if you aren't making much progress and are still limited after a few days, it can be a good idea to see a healthcare professional and make sure you didn't suffer an injury that could need surgery or an extended time out of your sport, exercise or work.

Are ice, compression wraps or bandages helping?

As in the previous example, using ice or cold packs can be a good first step for many people who twist their ankle, hurt their knee landing awkwardly and more. Using a compression wrap to help decrease swelling of that body part can be a good idea as well. Like pain, if these steps help you get back to normal, then they could be all you need to do. If you aren't making much progress after a few days of these treatments, then seeing a doctor can be helpful.



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Are over-the-counter medications helping?

There are a variety of over-the-counter medications like acetaminophen, ibuprofen and more that a huge number of people take after they get hurt. Generally they are not harmful, although you should check with your doctor to make sure they don't interfere with any medical conditions you have or medications you currently take. If they don't help decrease pain and swelling much, it might indicate that you have suffered a more serious injury. Also, be careful not to exceed recommended daily doses for these medications.



Did resting or modifying your activities help?

With many injuries, people can do their daily activities, like walking at work or school, typing on a computer and more. When they perform a certain move in their sport or exercise, though, they notice a sharp pain. Often taking a few days off from that sport or exercise, or even modifying the activity to avoid those positions, can be enough to help you overcome your pain. As you try to work back into those activities, if the pain returns, then it can be worthwhile to see a doctor or other healthcare professional.

Is the injury keeping you from sleeping?

Pain that keeps people awake at night is one of the most common reasons patients eventually come in to see a doctor. It could be shoulder pain that hurts when you lie on it or turn a certain way. It could be knee or ankle pain that throbs and keeps you from falling asleep or wakes you up several times each night. Even though injuries that keep you from sleeping do not always mean you need surgery, a doctor can find the cause of your pain and offer treatments to help you get some rest.



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Can you play your sport or exercise as well as you would like?

This is the best question, in my opinion, to decide if you should see a doctor. It's far more important than the length of time that has passed since an injury occurred.



Many people suffer injuries that gradually improve to the point that they can do some parts of their sport. They can get back to the basics of their exercise. But they can't perform or train as well as they would like.

You might be able to hit ground strokes in tennis but get a sharp pain in your shoulder when you serve. You might have achy knee pain running up and down hills that makes training for an upcoming race difficult. You might be able to do most exercises in the gym, but you notice an uncomfortable clicking sensation deep in your shoulder with bench presses or military presses.

If you can't do what you want to do as well as you want to do it, get it checked out. Very often these problems don't require surgery. Often some simple treatments like a short course of physical therapy, taping, use of a brace for a few weeks, or more can get you back to what you love to do. And if you do find out that your injury requires surgery, you can deal with it before you make the problem much worse.



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About Dr. David Geier

I'm an orthopaedic surgeon, sports medicine specialist, and author of *That's Gotta Hurt: The Injuries That Changed Sports Forever*. I provide education and commentary on sports and exercise injuries for athletes and active people to help you stay healthy and perform your best.



After spending eight years serving as Director of Sports Medicine at an academic medical center, I left to start my own practice. I currently serve as Medical Director of Sports Medicine at a private hospital outside of Charleston, South Carolina. I hold a board certification from the American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery in Orthopaedic Surgery as well as a subspecialty certification in Orthopaedic Sports Medicine.

Currently I serve as the Communications Council Chair for the American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine (AOSSM) Board of Directors. I also serve as Chairman of the Publications committee for AOSSM. I serve on the Outreach committee for the STOP Sports Injuries campaign and the Medical Aspects of Sports committee for the South Carolina Medical Association. I have previously served as the Chairman of the Public Relations committee for AOSSM and as a member of the Sports Medicine Evaluation committee for the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons.

I started writing articles on my website – DrDavidGeier.com – in August 2010 as a hobby. My goal at the time was simple – to share sports medicine and wellness information in easy-to-understand language for athletes, parents, coaches and other healthcare providers.

What I never expected to find back in 2010 was a passion for communicating this information. Despite long hours in clinic and surgery, I'm still excited to open my laptop and write. I now write a regular column for the daily Charleston newspaper, The Post and Courier. I record videos every week answering questions from my audience, and I produce a weekly sports medicine podcast. I also created a networking and educational site for healthcare professionals who work with athletes and active people – Sports Medicine University. As of this writing, nearly 200,000 unique visitors come to my website every month.

For more information about me, or for more information on sports and exercise injuries and injury treatments and prevention, check out my site – DrDavidGeier.com and my Sports Medicine Simplified online courses.

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