

Common Climbing Injuries

An orthopaedic surgeon shares three common rock-climbing injuries – and how to protect yourself prior to and during your ascent.



Rock climbing and bouldering (rock climbing that doesn't require a rope or harness) have gained traction here in Singapore, with more rock walls and bouldering gyms popping up in recent years. With this rise in popularity has come an uptick in climbing-related injuries, explains DR KEVIN KOO, director and consultant orthopaedic surgeon at The Bone & Joint Centre.



Though both activities are excellent full-body workouts, the constant landing and falling, and the repetitive movements involved can lead to various impact and overuse injuries. The following are among the top climbing and bouldering injuries Dr Koo sees in his clinic.

#1 Ankle sprains and fractures

The repetitive falling that comes with rock climbing puts ankles at risk of impact injuries like sprains and fractures. All it takes is falling onto another surface or landing awkwardly for a climber to experience an ankle sprain or fracture, and the accompanying pain, swelling and inability to bear weight on it.

While RICE (rest, ice, compression, elevation) treatment and medication can reduce pain and swelling, Dr Koo says that self-treatments alone won't always cut it. If left untreated, a badly sprained or fractured ankle can cause joint instability, which predisposes the joint to further complications such as osteoarthritis that can impact mobility. He therefore advises physiotherapy to help strengthen the ankle and restore movement.

For those patients who find they still can't resume their normal activities after physiotherapy, surgical repair may be necessary, says Dr Koo. This can now be done arthroscopically with keyhole surgery, a method that he often prefers over more traditional open-surgery procedures, which tend to be more painful post-op.

#2 Rotator cuff injury

Climbing requires frequent arm extensions to reach overhead and pull up one's weight. This makes climbers especially vulnerable to shoulder injuries such as tendonitis and tears in the rotator cuff, a group of muscles and tendons that surround the shoulder joint. The rotator cuff can also be injured from falling on an outstretched arm or other form of impact, resulting in pain and weakness in the shoulder, plus limited range of movement.

Treatment usually starts with rest, pain relievers and physiotherapy. However, Dr Koo says that repair via keyhole surgery may be necessary for a torn tendon if conservative treatment fails.

#3 Tennis elbow

Tennis elbow (lateral epicondylitis) is a painful condition that occurs when tendons in the elbow are overloaded, usually by repetitive motions. Rock climbers are at risk of this injury because they're constantly pulling with the same arm muscles and performing movements that put strain on the tendons around the elbow.

Apart from rest and anti-inflammatories, Dr Koo recommends shockwave therapy or hydrocortisone injections to help relieve the pain and tenderness. He also recommends wearing a brace to prevent further injury.

Dr Koo's injury prevention tips

- Learn and use the proper falling and landing techniques, even if there's a padded landing mat. It may take the help of a coach to get your form and technique right.
- Avoid over-exertion, and rest when you're tired so that you don't compromise your technique and posture.
- Prior to your climb, get in a proper warm-up that includes dynamic and static stretches.
- If you do get injured, seek medical attention early. This can help minimise and even prevent additional problems from occurring and ensure that appropriate treatment is given. *α*

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