

Returning to Play for Musicians

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Returning to play after an injury is not as easy as it may seem. A major factor in most injuries is “over-doing it.” Once you are feeling better, you may be tempted to quickly return to your routine. Unfortunately, during the recovery period following an injury you are very susceptible to “over-do it” again. The reason is simple: you are not going to get any warning signals from your body while you are playing your instrument. So, if you “over-do it” you will likely feel your pain return only several hours later, or even the next day. And then you are right back where you started!

Therefore, it is important to follow a strict schedule when returning to your instrument. You must advance from one level to the next. You should stay at each level for the specified period of time, usually 3 to 7 days, depending on the severity of your injury. Sometimes you will even need to progress more slowly, using “in-between” levels. If your symptoms should return while you are playing at any particular level, then you must go back to the previous level temporarily.

Levels 0 and 1 involve no playing at all. You may need to start here if you are having symptoms with daily activities. Ice should always be the “natural” kind: ice cubes with a small amount of water placed in a plastic bag. A towel or wash-cloth should be placed between the ice and the skin. Cold should be applied for 10 to 15 minutes. With progression to **Level 1** you may begin doing some basic warm-up and stretching exercises, as instructed by your therapist, followed by ice. For both **Level 0** and **Level 1** you should space out your sessions throughout the day.

With **Level 2** you begin playing. As you recover, the amount of time you play will increase as you progress to **Level 8**. For example, at **Level 2** you will:

- play for 3 minutes,
- and then rest for 5 minutes;
- play for 3 minutes,
- and then rest for 5 minutes;
- play for 3 minutes.

You will thus play 9 minutes total. (As you can see, you will need a timer!) By playing such short periods with rest in between, you will not “over-do” it and re-injure yourself. As directed, you may repeat this whole session 2 or 3 times each day, with **at least 2 hours** between sessions. So you might actually play 18 or 27 minutes per day at **Level 2**. When you advance to **Level 3**, each session will consist of 15 minutes playing time, and you might play 30 or 45 minutes per day.

At **Level 9** and above you will increase your playing by adding additional sessions per day.

Playing Schedule

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LEVEL	PLAY — REST (minutes)	Number of repetitions	Number of sessions per day	Number of days (minimum of 3)	Warm-up before	Cool & stretch after	Ice after	Medications and other instructions
0	—	—	6		—	—	Yes	
1	—	—	4		Yes	Yes	Yes	
2	3 / 5	3			Yes	Yes	Yes	
3	5 / 5	3			Yes	Yes	Yes	
4	7 / 5	3			Yes	Yes	Yes	
5	10 / 5	3			Yes	Yes	Yes	
6	15 / 5	3			Yes	Yes	Yes	
7	20 / 5	3			Yes	Yes	Yes	
8	25 / 5	3			Yes	Yes	Yes	
9	25 / 5	4			Yes	Yes	No	
10	25 / 5	5			Yes	Yes	No	
11	50 / 10	3			Yes	Yes	No	
12	50 / 10	4			Yes	Yes	No	