Sore Muscles After a Workout: Good Pain or Danger Sign?

Last week, I got a message from my friend: "I can't move my arms. Did I break them?"

She started her first gym class yesterday and couldn’t even brush her hair.

Muscle soreness after a workout is a common symptom. But sometimes, it is a warning sign. This is rare.

As a pharmacist, I always hear two questions:

1. Is it normal?
2. What can I do about it?

So let’s answer these questions in more detail.

Is It Normal to Be Sore After Working Out?

Yes, it is normal in most cases.

This normal pain is called DOMS (delayed onset muscle soreness).

It usually happens after a new exercise, when you are new to the gym, or when you push harder than usual.

Why is it called “delayed”? Because it starts 1 to 3 days after a workout, and it may last for a few days.

Your muscles are made of groups of fibers. They move and stretch with you. During exercise, these fibers get tiny tears. This causes pain. Then your body starts to repair them.

DOMS and lactic acid

Many people think that lactic acid causes DOMS. This is not correct.

There is no relation between them.

DOMS comes from tiny muscle tears, and muscle damage.

You will feel the soreness in the exact muscle you worked.

Here is what DOMS usually feels like:

- It starts one to three days after your workout.
- A feeling of fatigue.
- Tenderness when you touch the affected muscle.
- Pain during movement.
- Mild swelling in the affected muscle.
- Stiffness especially when you wake up.

How long does DOMS last?

Usually, it disappears in a few days, rarely lasting more than 5 days.

Does Soreness Mean You Had a Good Workout?

No. DOMS usually starts when you try a new exercise or increase the intensity of your workout.

A good workout is measured by progress, not by pain.

As your body adapts, you will feel less sore. This does not mean your workout is not working.

How to Manage Sore Muscles After Working Out

There is no special treatment for DOMS. But these steps can improve the pain:

1. **Rest.** Rest is the main treatment. It gives your muscles time to heal.
2. **Use your sore muscles lightly.** It is OK to use sore muscles in your daily routine. But try to avoid hard work.
3. **Massage.** Massaging a sore muscle may increase blood flow and improve stiffness.
4. **Gentle stretching.** It may ease stiffness. But it does not reduce soreness much.
5. **Hydration.** Drink plenty of water. It supports healing.
6. **Hot or cold.** A cold may reduce pain and swelling. Heat may reduce stiffness.
7. **Over-the-counter painkillers.** NSAIDs like ibuprofen, or acetaminophen, can help with pain. But they are not safe for everyone. Let's look in more detail.

Will Ibuprofen Help Muscle Soreness?

Ibuprofen is an NSAID (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug).

It can ease muscle pain for a while. But soreness often peaks 1 to 3 days after a hard workout. At this time, studies show ibuprofen has only a small effect.

Some doctors advise against it. Here is why:

- Your body repairs muscle through inflammation. Ibuprofen blocks this process. So it may slow healing.
- It hides your pain. So you may overwork when you need rest.
- Drink enough water. Dehydration plus ibuprofen can hurt your kidneys.

Who should be careful?

If you have any of these, ask your doctor or pharmacist first:

- A stomach ulcer.
- Kidney, heart, liver, or asthma problems.
- Blood clotting problems, or you take anticoagulants like warfarin.
- High blood pressure, or you take blood pressure medicine.
- You are pregnant.

What can you take instead?

If you need a painkiller, acetaminophen (paracetamol) is often the safer choice.

- It is gentler on the kidneys than ibuprofen. (Houston Methodist)
- Use it only when you need it.
- Ask your doctor for the correct dose.
- Check other medicines you take.

When Is Muscle Soreness a Warning Sign?

Some symptoms mean you shouldn't wait, and you must see a doctor.

- Pain that lasts more than a week.
- Sharp pain that comes suddenly.
- Swelling, red skin, or dark marks on the sore muscle.
- Numbness or tingling.
- Weakness. You cannot move the muscle as you normally do.

Go to the emergency room if you have:

- Dark or bloody urine with severe muscle pain.
- Chest pain or trouble breathing.

What is rhabdo?

Rhabdo is short for rhabdomyolysis. It is rare but serious. Your muscles break down and release harmful substances into your blood. This can damage your kidneys.

DOMS vs Rhabdo

How to know if your soreness is normal or an emergency

	DOMS (normal)	Rhabdo (emergency)
Pain	Tender and stiff	Severe pain
Swelling	Mild	Severe
Urine	Normal color	Dark or bloody
Time	Starts 1 to 3 days after a workout. Rarely lasts more than 5 days	Not normal soreness. Needs urgent care
What to do	Rest and gentle care	**Go to the emergency room**

Not sure? Ask a doctor.

Source: Cleveland Clinic

Final Thoughts

Sore muscles after a workout are normal. It goes away in a few days.

Rest, gentle movement, and water can help.

Listen to your body. Real progress is not about pain. It is about being consistent.

References

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