

Common Soft Tissue Injuries Sustained in Car Accidents

A Palm Beach Gardens attorney who fights to help you recover compensation

Most people walk away from a [car accident](#) expecting to feel sore for a few days and then get back to normal. But soft tissue injuries have a way of humbling that expectation. Unlike a broken bone, which shows up clearly on an X-ray and comes with a cast and a clear timeline, soft tissue injuries are quiet, invisible, and often underestimated.

They can take days to show symptoms, and when they do, they can be genuinely disruptive to work, sleep, and basic daily movement. Here's why you should get prompt medical care and what you can do to maximize your compensation.

What happens to your body in a crash?

The human body is built to tolerate only a specific range of forces and speeds. A car accident, even a relatively minor one, can exceed those limits in a fraction of a second. In a rear-end collision, for example, your torso gets pushed forward while your head lags behind. The neck snaps back into hyperextension, then whips forward, all within about 300 milliseconds. That's faster than your muscles can react. By the time your body "knows" what happened, the damage is already done.

What makes this especially tricky is that you might not feel it right away. Adrenaline suppresses pain in the immediate aftermath of a car accident. Inflammation builds gradually, which means the worst stiffness and soreness often peaks 24 to 72 hours later. Many people go home from a crash feeling shaken but okay, then wake up two days later barely able to turn their head or get off the couch. This delayed onset is normal, but it causes real problems when people don't seek medical care promptly.

Which soft tissue injuries show up most often after car accidents?

The type and severity of a soft tissue injury depends on the direction of impact, the position of the occupant, and the forces involved, but a few injuries show up far more often than others. They most commonly include the following:

Whiplash

Whiplash is by far the most common, and probably the most misunderstood. It's not a single injury but a mechanism that can damage the muscles, ligaments, discs, and joint capsules of the cervical spine all at once.

Neck pain and stiffness are the obvious symptoms, but whiplash can also produce headaches, shoulder pain, dizziness, jaw pain, and cognitive symptoms like difficulty concentrating or disrupted sleep. These broader effects are sometimes called whiplash-associated disorder, and

they're more common than most people realize. Roughly half of whiplash patients still report symptoms a year later, and a significant portion develop chronic pain.

Muscle strains

Muscle strains are basically tears in the muscle fibers, ranging from microscopic damage to a complete rupture. The neck and lower back are the most commonly strained areas in car accidents, followed by the shoulders and chest. A strained muscle hurts, causes spasm, and limits movement. Severe strains can take months to heal and may require formal physical therapy to restore full function.

Ligament sprains

Ligament sprains happen when a joint is forced beyond its normal range, stretching or tearing the ligaments that stabilize it. The cervical spine, knees, wrists, and ankles are common targets in car accidents.

Unlike muscle, ligament tissue has a poor blood supply, which makes it slow to heal. A severely sprained ligament can leave a joint permanently loose and unstable if it's not treated correctly.

Disc injuries

Disc injuries deserve special mention because they often get lumped in with soft tissue claims even though they carry serious long-term consequences. The intervertebral discs in your spine act as shock absorbers between the vertebrae. The forces of a crash can cause them to bulge, herniate, or tear.

Rotator cuff injuries

Rotator cuff injuries often occur because of the position a driver is in at impact. For example, they might have their hands on the wheel, arms slightly extended, shoulder muscles engaged.

Airbag deployment and the shoulder belt can also violently load the shoulder joint. Partial rotator cuff tears can sometimes be managed with therapy, but full-thickness tears, especially large ones, may require surgery.

Knee injuries

Knee injuries are common when the knee strikes the dashboard in a frontal collision. The posterior cruciate ligament takes the brunt of that direct impact, but the medial collateral ligament and the menisci can also be damaged depending on the angle of force.

Meniscal tears are particularly important to address because untreated tears accelerate cartilage wear and can contribute to arthritis years down the line.

Contusions

Contusions, or deep bruising, might seem like a minor complaint, but they shouldn't be dismissed too quickly. A seatbelt bruise across the chest or abdomen should prompt a closer look for underlying injury to the ribs, sternum, or internal organs. Airbag deployment can cause significant soft tissue trauma to the face, neck, and arms even when it prevents something far worse.

How do doctors diagnose these injuries?

A lot of people leave their first post-accident appointment frustrated. They came in hurting, got an X-ray, and were told everything looks fine. The problem is that X-rays only show bone, and a completely normal X-ray is entirely consistent with a herniated disc, a torn ligament, or significant muscle damage. Diagnosing soft tissue injuries requires a different approach:

- **MRI:** The gold standard for soft tissue diagnosis. It can reveal muscle damage, ligament integrity, disc morphology, and nerve root compression that X-rays simply cannot detect.
- **Ultrasound:** Useful for evaluating tendons and bursae, particularly in the shoulder. It's real-time, has no radiation, and is especially good at detecting tears in superficial structures.
- **Physical and neurological examination:** Range of motion testing, reflex assessment, muscle strength testing, and specific orthopedic tests help pinpoint which structures are injured and whether nerves are involved.
- **Clinical history and crash mechanism:** A thorough clinician uses the direction of impact, timing of symptoms, and the patient's full history to build a complete diagnostic picture.

What does treatment look like?

Treatment for soft tissue injuries follows a general progression from conservative to more intensive, depending on how the injury responds. Most people don't need surgery, but recovery rarely happens on its own without the right intervention at each stage:

- **Rest and early movement:** In the first few days, the goals are controlling pain and swelling while protecting the injured tissue. Complete immobilization is actually discouraged by current evidence because it promotes stiffness and delays healing. Short-term rest with gentle, pain-guided movement is the preferred approach.
- **Anti-inflammatory medications:** NSAIDs, muscle relaxants, and over-the-counter pain relievers help manage symptoms through the acute phase and make early movement more tolerable.
- **Physical therapy:** The cornerstone of soft tissue recovery. A good PT will restore range of motion, rebuild strength, correct movement patterns, and progress the patient through a structured rehabilitation plan using manual therapy, therapeutic exercise, and modalities like ultrasound or electrical stimulation.
- **Chiropractic care and massage therapy:** Valuable adjuncts for spinal soft tissue injuries and chronic muscle tension, particularly for whiplash and lower back injuries.

- **Corticosteroid or PRP injections:** When conservative care plateaus, injections can reduce inflammation and create a better environment for rehabilitation to take hold. Platelet-rich plasma is increasingly used for tendon and ligament injuries specifically.
- **Surgery:** Reserved for complete tears, disc herniations with significant neurological compromise, and situations where the structural damage can't be addressed any other way.
- **Multidisciplinary chronic pain management:** When pain outlasts the expected healing window, treatment often expands to include pain specialists, cognitive behavioral therapy, and intensive rehabilitation to address central sensitization, a state where the nervous system itself becomes hypersensitized to pain.

Do insurance companies downplay soft tissue injuries?

Soft tissue injuries are the most disputed category of car accident claims because they're invisible on standard imaging, rely heavily on self-reported pain, and can be difficult to tie conclusively to a specific crash.

Insurance adjusters are trained to exploit every one of those vulnerabilities. They'll point to a normal X-ray as evidence that nothing is seriously wrong. They'll argue that your herniated disc or ligament damage was pre-existing. They'll scrutinize gaps in your treatment history and use them to suggest your injury wasn't that serious to begin with.

They may also move quickly to offer a settlement before the full extent of your injuries is clear, banking on the fact that you don't yet know what your recovery will actually cost. These aren't oversights. They're strategies, and they work particularly well against people who don't have legal representation pushing back.

Suffered a soft tissue injury in a Florida car accident? We can help

At [The Law Offices of Casey D. Shomo, P.A.](#), we know the tactics insurance companies try to use when it comes to soft tissue injuries. They don't take your injuries seriously, but we do. Our law firm has over 30 years of experience fighting for car accident victims in Palm Beach Gardens and throughout South Florida.

From your first consultation, Casey and his team go to work coordinating your medical records, identifying the right specialists, documenting the full impact of your injury on your work and daily life, and handling every communication with the insurance company so you don't inadvertently say something that hurts your claim.

If you were hurt in a car accident and you're dealing with neck pain, back pain, radiating symptoms, or any injury that an insurance adjuster is already trying to downplay, we're here to help. [Contact us](#) to schedule your free consultation. The sooner you get an experienced attorney involved, the stronger your claim will be.