

Exercises for the Foot and Ankle

You sprained your ankle. What now?

Thousands of people—from the “weekend warrior” to the accomplished athlete—seek medical attention for this common malady each year. You have probably already taken steps to reduce your pain and swelling, as well as to prevent more serious injury. But what you do next is at least as important. Doing the right exercises can mean a quicker return to full activity. The power to resume your normal routine rests with you!

WHAT'S TO BE GAINED?

Uninjured, your ankle can move in a number of directions. The point behind these exercises is to 1) restore to normal what's known as “range of motion,” 2) rebuild strength, and 3) retrain the nerves, muscles, and ligaments in your ankle to respond to your body's different movements (proprioceptive training).

The more flexibility you gain during rehabilitation, the sooner you will walk more normally. Maybe you've been given a splint or brace or been asked to use crutches, but the idea is to get you up and moving as soon as your body weight can support a relatively pain-free, normal gait.

GETTING STARTED

You can begin some gentle range-of-motion exercises right away. Probably the easiest way is to “write” the alphabet with your big toe. Wearing an active ankle support may help reduce swelling and pain, allowing you to regain a greater range of motion more quickly and exercise your ankle more comfortably.

Many people find it helpful to keep an ice pack on their ankle while doing this exercise (unless they have a problem with circulation from diabetes or other causes). Just place a wet washcloth over the injury, put some ice in a plastic bag, and lay the bag over the washcloth. Wrap a towel around your ankle to hold the ice pack in place.

INCREASING ACTIVITY

In a couple of days, when you've achieved fairly good motion from doing the ABCs, you can move on to the exercises illustrated here. (It may also be helpful to put an ice bag on your injury

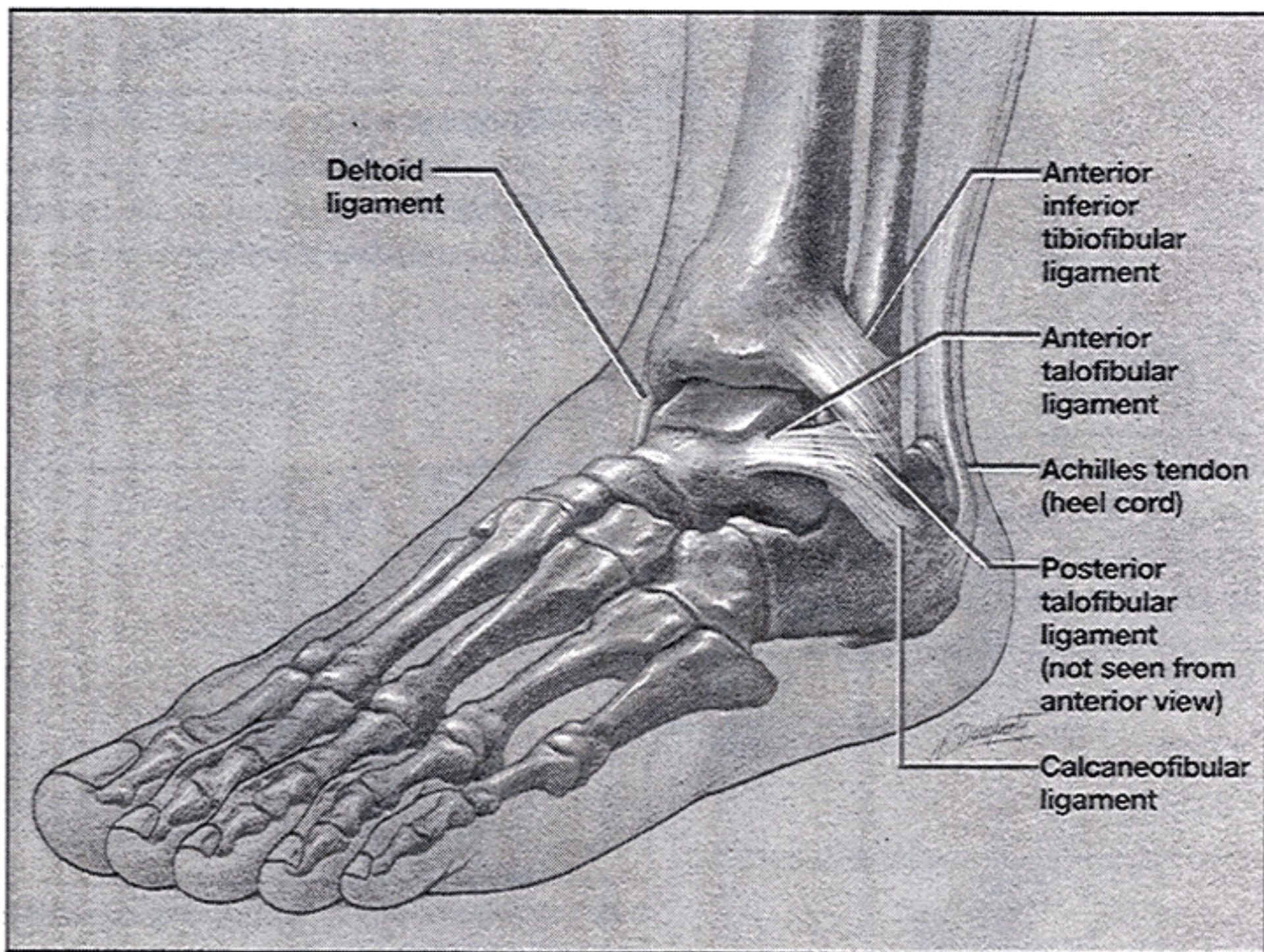


Illustration: John M. Daugherty

for a few minutes before beginning these exercises.) Remember to start slowly—probably not more than 5 to 10 repetitions of each exercise. Do them once or twice a day, depending on what your body tells you. Then add repetitions as your condition allows. Be sure to do each exercise slowly and use smooth motions.

The exercises should be performed in the pain-free range of motion, which simply means you should stop at any point you feel pain.

PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF

It's important to remember that even after you're walking without aid, you should continue the exercises to speed the rehabilitation process and prevent reinjuring your ankle.

STRETCHING

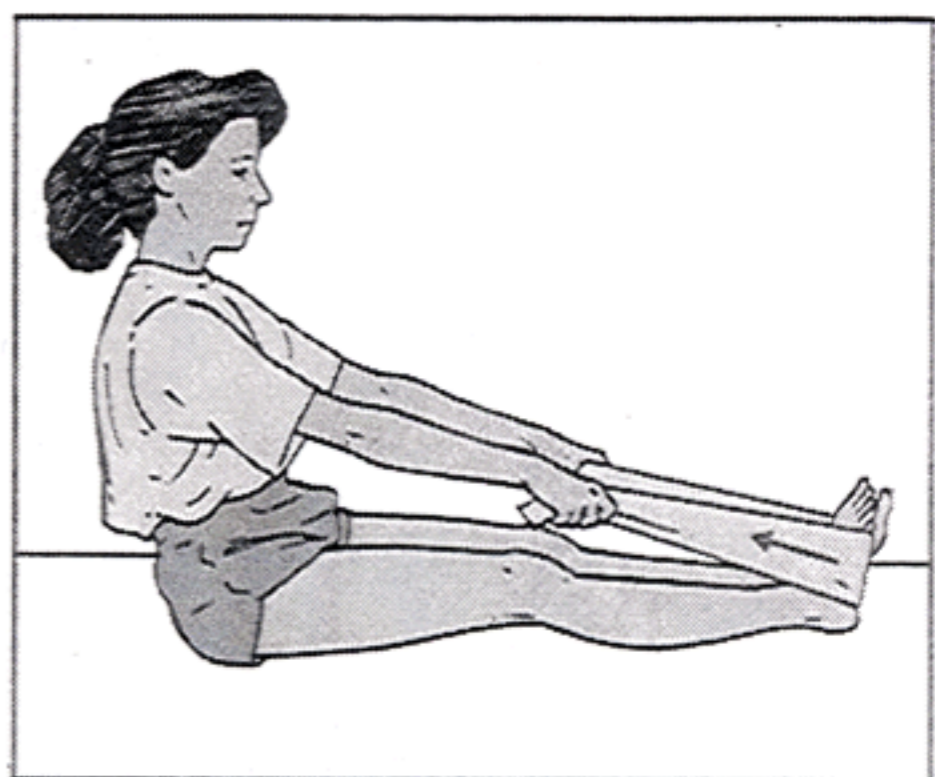


Illustration: Terry Boies

Towel stretches. Fold a towel lengthwise and position it around your forefoot. Gently flex your foot upward. This improves heel-cord (Achilles tendon) flexibility.

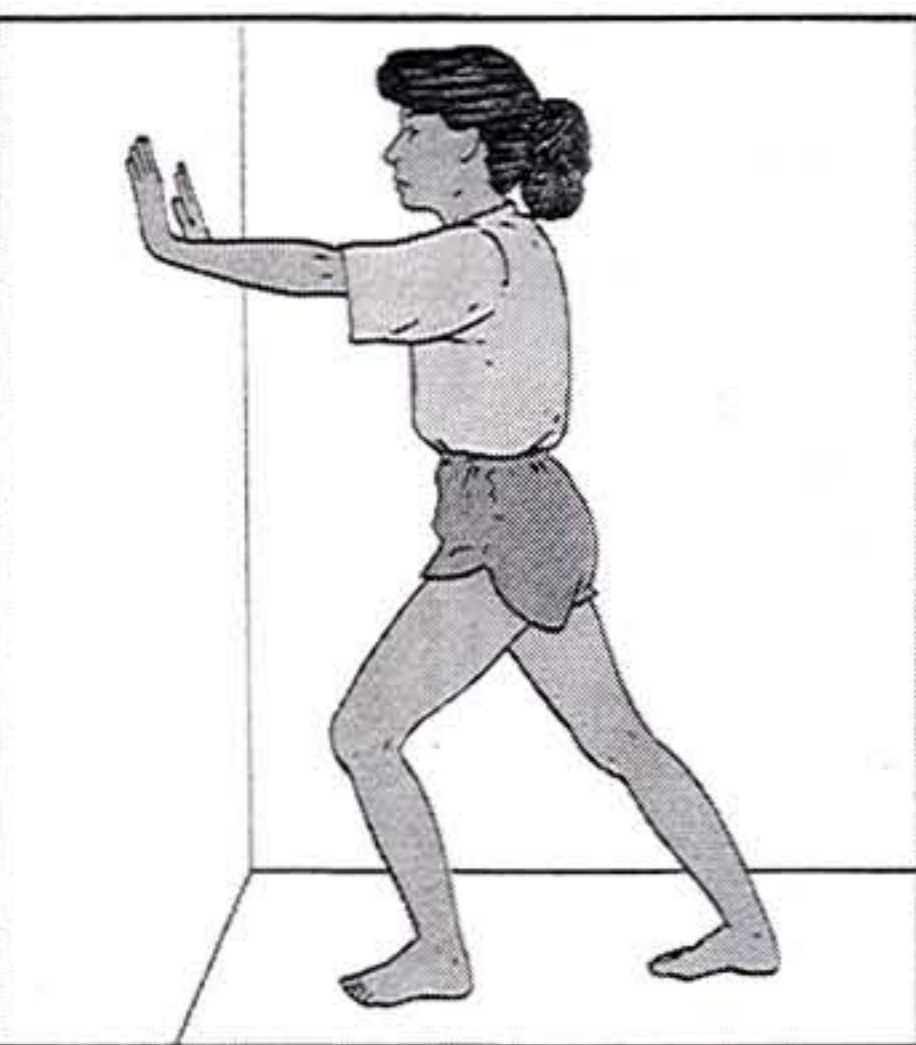
Do _____ times and hold for _____.

STRETCHING



Heel-cord board stretches. Place the ball of your foot on a slanted board and press your heel to the floor repeatedly. Keep your knee slightly flexed to give your ankle more upward flexibility.

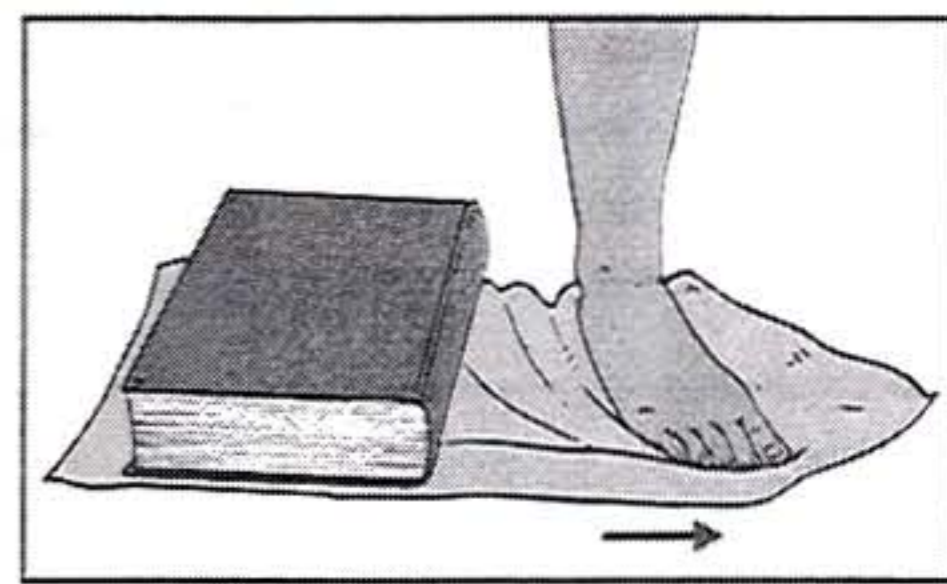
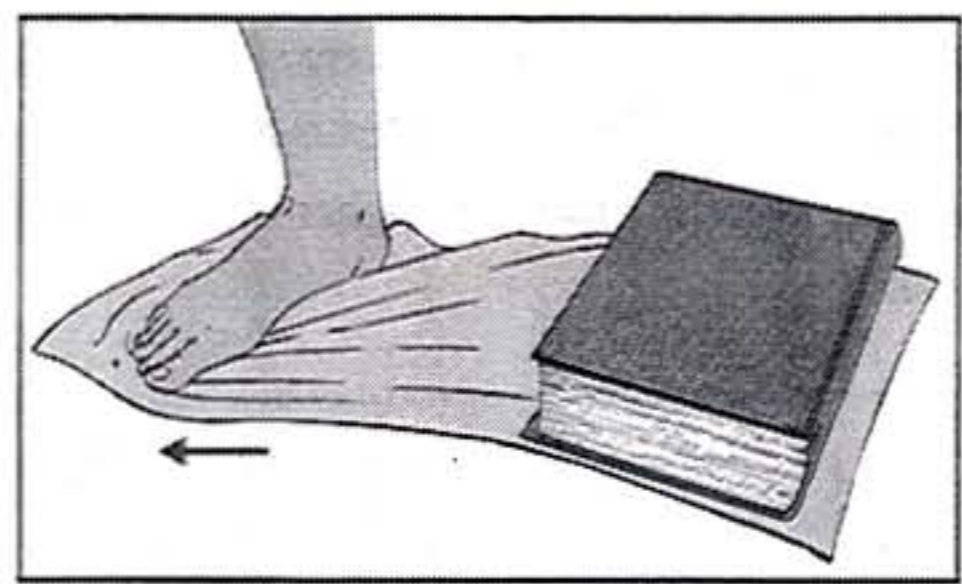
Do _____ times and hold for _____.



Heel-cord wall stretches. Place your hands on a wall in front of you, supporting your weight on the uninjured leg. Extend the injured leg behind your body with your heel flat on the floor and lean forward.

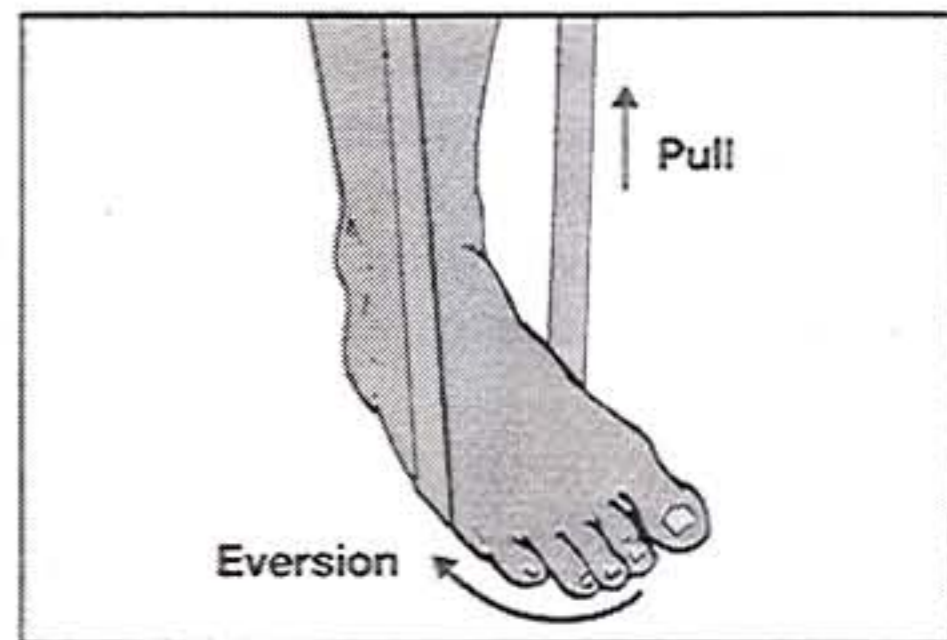
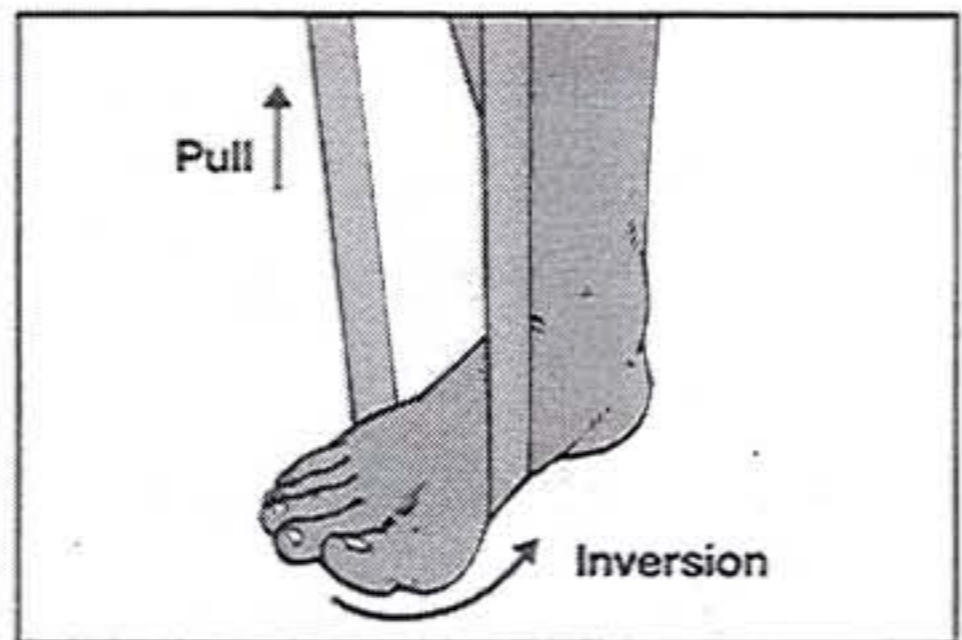
Do _____ times and hold for _____.

STRENGTHENING



Towel slides. Set a 5- to 10-pound weight on one end of an open towel. (A good-sized book makes a handy weight. Test it on your bathroom scale to make sure it's the right weight.) Place your foot on the towel and alternately slide your foot out to the side and inward toward the center of your body, pivoting at the heel in each direction.

Do _____ sets of _____ exercises.



Inversion/eversion strengthening exercises. Hold a loop of heavy rubber tubing around your foot and grasp it with both hands. (Or try a bungee tie-down cord from a hardware store.) Pull the tube out to the side and resist the pull with your ankle to strengthen the muscles on the inside of the ankle (inversion). Pull the tube inward, again resisting with your ankle to strengthen the muscles on the outside (eversion).

Do _____ sets of _____ exercises.

PROPRIOCEPTIVE TRAINING

Balancing. This is an exercise you should do after you've regained some strength. It may take a couple of weeks before you are ready. Stand on your injured foot, raise the uninjured foot, and bounce a ball around you. You can also try throwing the ball against a wall while you hold the same position. This exercise helps the nerves, muscles, and ligaments in your ankle "remember" how to respond to your body's movements. Build up to 5 minutes.

