

# RETURN TO PLAY GUIDANCE

R.NAPIER



## Return to Play Protocols

Return-to-play (RTP) protocols after injury are essential for safely reintegrating athletes back into team sports. Protocols should balance recovery with the physical demands of the sport, to reduce the risk of re-injury while allowing the player to regain performance. RTP protocols should include:

### 1. Early Stage: Acute Management and Rest

- **Immediate Treatment:** In the initial days, apply RICE (Rest, Ice, Compression, Elevation) to reduce inflammation & manage pain.
- **Medical Assessment:** Consult medical professionals for clinical assessment & imaging to understand the injury's severity.
- **Restricted Activity:** Avoid activities that may exacerbate the injury until pain & swelling have settled.

## 2. Intermediate Stage: Controlled Rehab and Reconditioning

- **Physical Therapy:** Gradually introduce physical therapy exercises to restore range of motion, muscle strength, & flexibility.
- **Isometric Exercises:** Implement controlled, non-weight-bearing exercises to maintain muscle without stressing the injury site.
- **Proprioception & Balance Training:** Essential for lower extremity injuries, such as knee or ankle injuries, to re-train joint stability and control.



### 3. Advanced Rehab: Sport-Specific Conditioning

- **Functional Exercises:** Begin sport-specific drills to improve movement patterns, endurance, and strength relevant to the sport.
- **Agility Drills:** Focus on plyometrics & agility exercises to prepare for high-intensity sports that require sudden stops, cuts, & changes in direction.
- **Gradual Increase in Intensity:** Progressively increase the duration, intensity, & complexity of drills while monitoring for any signs of pain, swelling or discomfort.



### 4. Pre-Return Phase: Modified Practice Integration

- **Partial Team Practices:** Engage the athlete in non-contact or partial contact drills to assess readiness without full exposure to gameplay risks.
- **Psychological Readiness:** Assess mental readiness, as fear of re-injury can impact performance.
- **Load Monitoring:** Digital wearables can help in tracking load, fatigue, & recovery rates.

### 5. Return to Full Competition

- **Final Medical Clearance:** Conduct a final check-up to ensure physical readiness & address any remaining concerns.
- **Gradual Gameplay Introduction:** Consider restricting minutes or rotational play to allow a phased return.
- **Performance Monitoring:** Maintain load & performance monitoring during the initial games to ensure no signs of re-injury or overload.

#### Important Considerations

- **Individualisation:** RTP protocols must be tailored to the specific injury, sport, and player profile.
- **Communication:** Effective communication among the athlete, coaching staff, medical team, & family (if applicable) is essential to ensure understanding & adherence to the RTP plan.