



BREAKS, TEARS AND STRAINS

Preventing Sports Injuries

You've heard about the many health benefits of physical activity. On top of improving your fitness, exercising and playing sports can also help boost self-esteem, coordination and self-discipline—particularly for children. But these benefits can come at a price: sports injuries. Fortunately, you can prevent many sports injuries by taking some simple precautions.

Contact sports like football put athletes at obvious risk. Of special concern are severe injuries to the neck, spinal cord and, for young athletes, growth plates—the areas of developing cartilage where bone growth occurs.

“The highest rates of injuries occur in sports that involve contacts and collisions,” says Dr. Lynne Haverkos, a pediatrician at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). “Head injuries are the most serious of the sports-related injuries, and although fatal head injuries are rare, they are the leading cause of death from a sports-related injury.”

TAKING THE RIGHT PRECAUTIONS

The first thing you need to do is make sure you're using the right helmet or other protective gear for your sport. And be sure it fits properly.

But virtually any part of your body can be injured during sports or exercise. Many injuries involve the musculoskeletal system: muscles, bones and associated tissues like cartilage. “Sprains and strains are among the most common injuries people get,” Haverkos says, adding, “Knees, ankles and wrists are commonly injured joints.”

Equipment can play a role in these types of injuries as well. From shoes to bicycles to ice skates, whatever your sport, good equipment that fits your body properly can help you prevent all kinds of problems. Make sure equipment fits properly, and that the kids are using it safely. And provide a safe environment. A poorly maintained playing field or unsecured soccer goal can cause serious injury.

Kids aren't the only ones who get sports injuries. More adults than ever are participating in sports. Less agile and resilient than they once were, adults can be more prone to injury than they think.

You're more likely to hurt yourself if you haven't been keeping fit. People who take the winter off and start rigorous activity as soon as the weather improves are prone to injury. If you try to pack a week's worth of activity into a day or 2 on the weekend, you're also at risk.

"It's the sudden changes that really get you, the sudden jumps in activity," says Dr. Martha Murray of Children's Hospital, Boston.

If you've been off for a while, don't try to do too much at first. "You should think about any sports participation as something you need to prepare for," Murray says. Whatever your age and whatever level of sport you do, it's important to train your muscles and joints so they have adequate strength, endurance and flexibility. "Start slow and then build up so you are ready when the activity starts," she says.

Warm-up exercises, such as stretching or light jogging, before an activity reduce the chance of muscle strain or other injury. And make sure to cool down. For example, after a race, be sure to walk or jog lightly for 5 minutes so your pulse slows down gradually. After a workout, when the body's tissues are warmer and more flexible, is also the safest time to do stretching to work on your flexibility.

Don't let the prospect of getting injured scare you off. We already know a lot about how to prevent injuries. And the benefits you can get from sports and exercise are too important to ignore.



DEALING WITH AN INJURY

If you have severe pain, swelling or numbness, or can't tolerate any weight on the injured area, contact your health care provider or go to an emergency room. It's probably okay to treat less severe injuries at home—at least, at first. Follow the RICE method:

Rest. Give the injured area time to heal.

Ice. Apply an ice pack for up to 20 minutes at a time, 4-8 times a day.

Compression. Wrap the area with an elastic bandage.

Elevation. If possible, keep the injured area elevated above the level of the heart.

If you're using RICE but the pain or other symptoms get worse, contact your health care provider.

