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Five ways to prevent a sports injury

With the fall sports season underway, athletes of all ages are gearing up for success. Unfortunately, the season can end quickly for athletes who sustain an injury.

The good news is many sports injuries are preventable with careful preparation before the season begins—and a little common sense.

The most common sports injuries

Bruises, muscle strains, and joint sprains are among the most common sports-related injuries. Athletes tend to recover from these types of injuries fairly quickly, especially if the injuries are treated soon after they occur.

Major injuries, such as broken bones or ligament ruptures, are more likely to occur early in the sports season. Many of these injuries occur because athletes have not prepared physically for their sport before the season began.

Your age can also put you at greater risk for certain injuries. Because they are still growing and not as experienced in their sport, younger athletes are at high risk for sports injuries. These injuries can include bone fractures. A unique children's fracture involves an athlete's growth plate, which is where bones grow longer as children grow taller. A fracture to the growth plate can cause permanent damage and result in abnormal growth of the affected bone.

As athletes age, their soft tissue becomes stiffer and less resilient, leading to a greater risk for tendon ruptures. For example, an Achilles tendon rupture—which occurs when the tendon connecting your calf muscles to your heel bone tears—is a major injury requiring surgery and months of rehabilitation.

Concussions are also a concern for all athletes, regardless of age or sport. If you sustain any sudden head trauma or movement, there is a risk of concussion and with any associated symptoms like loss of balance, headache, or confusion (to name just a few), you should be evaluated immediately for a concussion. Your certified athletic trainer or physician should assess your condition using a concussion protocol, which outlines how a concussion is diagnosed and is then managed all the way through returning to play.

Can you prevent an injury?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 2.6 million young athletes will suffer a sports-related injury this year. More than half of those are preventable.

While some injuries are unavoidable, there are steps you can take to limit your risk of an injury, including:

- **Get fit before the season begins.** Focus your attention on strength training and aerobic fitness to get your body in shape before the start of your sports season.
- **Train for your sport.** Very few athletes excel at their sport without practicing it first. Develop the unique skills for your sport in the off-season.
- **Avoid specializing in a single sport, especially at a younger age.** The risk of overuse injuries, which occur because of repeated wear and tear on your muscles, ligaments, and bones, can decrease by taking a break during seasons and playing a variety of sports. Stress fractures, overuse injuries such as elbow ulnar collateral ligament injuries, and major injuries to the knee such as anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) tears are often seen in athletes who play one sport continuously without any break between seasons.



- **Schedule a pre-participation physical exam.** This important screening assesses your overall health and risk of injury before the start of your sports season.
- **Use common sense.** Make sure to stretch and warm up properly before practicing your sport. If you feel any unusual symptoms, including soreness or pain, make sure to speak with your certified athletic trainer, if available, or your physician. They will evaluate you to determine the source of your symptoms.

Treating your injury

It's important to get treatment as soon as possible if you sustain a sports-related injury. You should speak with your certified athletic trainer or physician to determine the extent of your injury and a treatment plan. If your team does not have a certified athletic trainer, it is recommended that you seek medical attention from a qualified doctor.

You may also use the RICE (rest, ice, compression, and elevation) method at home to relieve your symptoms—though this should never replace appropriate medical care. Every injury is unique, so it's important to talk to your certified athletic trainer or doctor to get an accurate diagnosis and personalized treatment plan for your specific injury.

When you receive treatment, remember to ask these important questions:

- Are there any alternative treatments available for treating my injury?
- What activity limitations do I have because of my injury?
- When do I need to follow up during my recovery process?
- When can I expect to return to my sport?

Your doctor may give you a ballpark estimate for when you can expect to return to play. It's important to remember this is only an estimate, because everyone heals at a different rate. Before you resume your activities, your doctor should completely evaluate you, and your certified athletic trainer should clear you using a return-to-play protocol.

By following the advice of your healthcare team and taking a few extra steps to prepare in the off-season, you can minimize your risk of a sports injury.



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