

Parents



How to Prevent and Spot Overuse Injuries in Kids

Injuries from youth sports are almost impossible to avoid, but following the suggestions below can help prevent injuries and reduce the risk of long-term complications.

What types of injuries occur?

Kids sustain two types of injuries in playing sports: acute and overuse. Acute injuries usually result from a single, traumatic event and may include wrist fracture, ankle sprain, and shoulder dislocation. Overuse injuries are more difficult to diagnose and treat because they are usually subtle and occur over time. When repetitive trauma affects the tendons, bones, and joints, an overuse injury develops. Common examples include tennis elbow, swimmer's shoulder, Achilles tendinitis, and stress fractures.

Why do injuries occur?

There are various reasons why an injury might occur, including improper training, improper technique, equipment failure, and/or anatomic or biomechanical issues of the athlete.

How can I tell if my child is injured?

Most children will let you know when they are hurt, but for those kids who try to tough it out, parents and caregivers should watch for signs of injury such as:

- Avoiding putting weight on a certain body part (e.g., ankle or wrist) or favoring one side of the body over the other (i.e., limping)
- Appearing to be in pain when using a particular body part
- Inability to sleep
- Shortness of breath/trouble breathing during activity
- Headaches during or after activity
- Appearing to experience stiffness in the joints or muscles
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Difficulty sitting and/or climbing stairs
- Inability to feel the fingers or toes
- Experiencing unusual weakness
- Irritated skin and/or blisters

If your child experiences sharp, stabbing pain, he/she should stop the activity immediately. Playing through pain may make the injury worse and probably cut your child's season short. If you have any concerns that your child might be injured, speak with a physician or certified athletic trainer immediately. The sooner an injury is diagnosed, the more effectively it can be treated, and the sooner an athlete can return to playing.

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What are some ways to prevent injuries?

- **Have your child receive a pre-participation physical.** Having an annual pre-participation physical exam allows for the screening, prevention, and treatment of any conditions.
- **Encourage your child to warm up properly before an activity.** Warming up before an activity involves gradually bringing the heart rate up from the resting level by engaging in low-impact exercise such as jogging in place. Athletes should also stretch their muscles to release tension and help prevent injury. Stretching involves going just beyond the point of resistance and should not include bouncing. Stretches should be held for 10-12 seconds.
- **Be sure your child cools down properly after an activity.** Cooling down after an activity allows an athlete's heart rate to gradually return to a resting level. Once again, stretching may be helpful to avoid injury.
- **Obtain instruction on proper training and technique.** Coaches and trainers are there to help teach proper technique and avoid injuries. It is very important for your child to listen to their instructions because most overuse injuries occur because of improper training or technique. Before beginning any training program or activity work, with a physician and/or coach to make sure the program won't cause chronic or recurrent problems. They will take into consideration your child's current fitness level and how the training program might complement or hurt it.
- **Increase training gradually.** When deciding when and how much to push your child to the next level, remember the 10 percent rule: do not increase training activity, weight, mileage, or pace by more than 10 percent per week. This allows the body ample time to recover.
- **Have your child wear proper fitting equipment.** Make sure your child's equipment such as running shoes are in good condition and fit properly. Something as simple as weekly equipment checks may help minimize the potential for injury.
- **Be sure your child drinks enough water.** Athletes often forget to hydrate—an essential step for the body to run well. Hydration allows muscles to work properly and avoid cramps and spasms. See that your child takes water breaks every 30 minutes or more often based on the level of activity and temperature.
- **Encourage your child to rest and take a break.** Athletes who play sports year-round are more likely than others to experience overuse injuries because they aren't giving their bodies a chance to rest and recover. Encourage your child to take at least one season off a year. Also, suggest ways for your child to mix it up—encourage your child to play different sports during the year to avoid using the same muscle groups continuously, which can also lead to overuse injuries.

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