

Ready to Play: How to Prevent Youth Sports Injuries

What you need to know to keep your kids and teens safe

In addition to boosting physical activity for children and teenagers, youth sports offer plenty of benefits when it comes to teaching teamwork, discipline, and motivation. But sometimes those lessons come at a high cost.

The prevalence of injuries is increasing at a significant rate and although there's a perception that kids can bounce back quickly from sprains and breaks, that's not always the case. Some injuries might cause long-term issues that can affect an athlete for years or even decades.

No matter what sport a young person takes on, injury prevention is crucial. Knowing the risks and employing some strategies now can help set up children and teens for safe sports long into the future.

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WHY ARE THERE SO MANY INJURIES?

Kids have been involved in athletic competition ever since games were first invented, but it's only been recently that sports injuries have begun to spike. There are several reasons for this unsettling trend:

Single sport focus: In the past, children and teens tended to pursue multiple sports throughout the year—for example, baseball in the spring, tennis in the summer, and track in the fall. That allowed them to have rest periods between sports and use different muscle groups in each sport.



But increasingly, there's an emphasis on perfecting their grasp of a single sport. A player might play competitive tennis year round, for instance, and go to multiple tennis camps and clinics. This increases the risk of overuse injuries considerably, particularly since there are no breaks for recovery.

Competitive intensity: When a child is involved in a single sport, the intensity level tends to be much higher, especially over time as competition levels get higher. In general, youth sports are drawing more focus from parents, coaches, and athletes, and many times, more emphasis is put on practice than on injury prevention.

Misconceptions about resilience: “Kids are made of rubber, they’ll bounce back, they heal quicker than adults”—all of these views can be detrimental to prevention strategies. The fact is that children and teens have growing bones, and when muscles tighten to compensate, it creates an imbalance in the body. Normally, this is corrected with a standard amount of time and physical activity, but when a sport is played intensely and over time, those imbalances create risk and young people aren’t as resilient in overcoming injuries as many might think.

Improper training techniques: Due to changing muscle mass, growing bones, and sports-specific issues, youth athletes require more training for **jumping** and deceleration. The latter requires skill in slowing down in a way that avoids injuries while still improving performance. This is hugely important in nearly every sport since it allows an athlete to change direction safely and re-accelerate at top speed. If they’re able to do that in a way that maintains stability and balance, they can often avoid issues, particularly with their knees.

WHAT PART DOES GENDER PLAY IN INJURY RISK?

All young athletes are experiencing physical changes that may increase their chances of injuries, but parents need to recognize that girls and boys have different issues that can boost risk considerably.

Girls are four to eight times more likely to have ACL injuries than boys¹, for example, because they have wider hip structures and quadriceps dominance that puts knees in danger.

Also, the hormonal changes they’re going through means that more relaxin is in their system—a hormone that can make ligaments looser. When that happens, it puts more stress on muscles and can lead to problems. With boys, there tends to be more muscle tightness and joint laxity than girls, setting them up for overuse injuries, sprains, and muscle strain.

¹ Hewett TE, Lindenfeld TN, Riccobene JV, Noyes FR. The effect of neuromuscular training on the incidence of knee injury in female athletes. A prospective study. *Am J Sports Med.* 1999;27(6):699-706.

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WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PREVENT INJURIES?

There are many tactics that parents and coaches can consider when it comes to injury prevention in young athletes:

- 1. Encourage participation in multiple sports,** or at least pursue cross training in order to work all muscle groups and prevent overuse issues.
- 2. Establish regular rest periods.** Professional athletes have an “off season” for a reason. It allows their bodies to recover from intense competition. Kids need the same, whether it’s one day off per week or a week off every few months.
- 3. Implement bodyweight training versus heavy weights for younger athletes.** Integrating heavy weights into a routine can put strain on muscles and bones, especially for pre-teen athletes.
- 4. Get a functional movement screening** By having a physical therapist or sports therapist evaluate a child before injuries, you may be able to prevent issues in the long run. These therapists can identify abnormal body mechanics and anatomic alignment, as well as movement patterns, and those insights may help to open up better training and playing options.

In general, it’s important to remember that kids don’t just “bounce back” from injuries. Because their bodies are still changing, they require longer recovery timeframes and more awareness about how sports are affecting their muscles, ligaments, and tendons. With knowledge and strong prevention strategies, they can keep playing safely.

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