

Injury prevention tips for school-aged athletes

The dawn of a new school year is an exciting for school-aged youngsters. Though many kids may not look forward to homework or getting up early, a new school year is often exciting for young athletes who long to get back on the playing fields and compete with their teammates.

As valuable and exciting as participating in team sports can be, they can just as easily prove dangerous for athletes who aren't prepared for the rigors of physical activity. A summer spent lounging poolside might be just what kids need after a long school year, but that relaxation can put youngsters in jeopardy of suffering an injury when they return to team sports in the fall. Many a young athlete has pulled a hamstring or suffered a shin splint when returning to athletic competition after a long layoff. But such injuries are largely preventable, and the following tips can help school-aged athletes ensure their return to competition is as painless as it is pleasurable.

* Condition your muscles in the weeks heading up to tryouts or the start of the school year. Many fall sports feature tryouts near the end of summer or at the very beginning of the school year. That means athletes must start conditioning their muscles early. Discuss with your parents, coaches and physicians which muscles you will be working when playing a particular sport. Adults should help you develop a conditioning program that gets the right muscle groups ready for the rigors of your sport. A properly conditioned athlete has a much lesser risk of injury than one who is not. Your offseason conditioning program should begin slowly and gradually grow more challenging as you draw closer to the school year.

* Stretch, stretch, stretch. Always stretch your muscles before any strenuous activities, whether it's an offseason conditioning program or an in-season competition. Stretching significantly reduces your risk of injury and can improve your performance on the field.

* Get geared up. The right gear is essential for young athletes looking to avoid injury. Though summer might seem tailor-made for flip-flops, such footwear should never be worn when exercising and preparing for the coming sports season. Athletic shoes specific to your sport are made to provide the support you will need as you train and compete. The same goes for the clothing you should wear when getting ready for the season. Wear the appropriate athletic attire to reduce your risk of injury.

* Weight train in the presence of your coaches or parents. Many athletes begin weight training for the first time when they are in high school. Weight training can be beneficial to young athletes, but such athletes should never lift weights unsupervised. Parents, trainers and coaches can explain the equipment to young athletes while ensuring they don't overdo it in the weight room. Lifting too much weight or having bad form when weightlifting can cause serious injury that can sideline youngsters for the coming season, if not longer. So young athletes should always weight train in the presence of an adult and always work with a spotter to help them should they struggle to finish a repetition.

* Don't try to match your fellow athletes. The human body develops differently for everyone. Young athletes must recognize that there's a chance their classmates and teammates may be developing more quickly than they are. These classmates may be more capable of performing certain physical activities. For example, a teammate might be able to lift more weight than you. Do not try to match your fellow athletes if your



body is uncomfortable performing a certain exercise. If you must endure substantial pain to perform a given exercise, then your body is likely telling you it simply isn't ready for that exercise. Don't force the body to do something just to keep up with your teammates.

* Take a break. Even if you rested for most of summer, you still will need to rest when you begin getting ready for the upcoming athletic season. Take at least one day off per week to allow your body to recover and recharge. Your body needs that recovery time to reduce its risk of injury.

School-aged athletes often look forward to a new school year as a chance to get back on the playing fields. But such athletes should emphasize safe training as the season draws closer.



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