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Sports Injuries from Overuse: Play it Safe and Wait **By CWK Network Producer**

"You know kids - they think they are going to get right over [an injury] and go out and play. And it's a macho thing to suck it up and play hurt. And unless you have someone there to give them advice, sometimes they will play when they shouldn't and re-injure themselves."

-Dr. Letha Griffin, M.D., Ph.D., Orthopedist, Piedmont Hospital

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that high school athletes alone account for an estimated 2 million injuries, 500,000 doctor visits and 30,000 hospitalizations every year. And orthopedic surgeons are now seeing two trends: a rapid increase in the number of youth sports injuries and a drop in the age of young athletes with overuse injuries.

Two years ago, 16-year-old Cooper injured his hamstring. The muscle was actually torn away from his bone.

"My hamstrings got too tight," says Cooper, a varsity football player, "and the bone pulled off with the hamstring when I was running at camp."

Cooper had to sit out for a year.

"One whole year, his ninth grade year, he couldn't do anything," says Cooper's mom, Robyn. "And he was, for an athlete, he was extremely frustrated and depressed - and you know, that was all he loves to do - is play football and sports."

According to research from the University of North Carolina, teen athletes who've had one injury are more than *twice* as likely to be injured again - compared to kids who've never been injured.

The main reason? They try to play too soon.

"You know kids, they think they are going to get right over that and go out and play," says orthopaedist Dr. Letha Griffin. "And it's a macho thing to suck it up and play hurt. And unless you have someone there to give them advice, sometimes they will play when they shouldn't and re-injure themselves."

A few months ago, Cooper injured his hamstring again.

"So I think he thought that was over," says his father, Jim. "So to watch it all start again has been hard - and I feel for him, and just try to encourage him and do everything we can for him to get better."

Doctors say because some kids are so eager - and because some coaches will look the other way - *parents* need to make sure an injury has fully healed.

For arms, legs and ankles, one test is: does the child have equal strength on both sides of their body?

"They don't go back to the sport until they have full range of motion, good strength, and they have what we call neuromuscular control - which is nothing more than balance," says Dr. Griffin. "[If] they can stand on that ankle with their eyes closed and balance correctly, and then they are ready to go."

Cooper now spends 30 minutes stretching every night, just like his doctor ordered.

“He worries about his future, and he doesn’t want to do anything that’s going to damage him long-term,” says Robyn.

What Parents Need to Know

According to the Campaign to Stop Sports Injuries, there are basically two types of sports injuries: acute injuries and overuse injuries. While overuse injuries are more common in sports than acute injuries, they are subtle and usually occur over time, making them challenging to diagnose and treat. They are the result of repetitive micro-trauma to the tendons, bones, and joints. Common examples include tennis elbow, swimmer’s shoulder, Youth Pitching elbow, runner’s knee, jumper’s knee, Achilles tendinitis, and shin splints.

Training errors are the most common cause of overuse injuries. These errors involve rapid acceleration of the intensity, duration, or frequency of activity. Overuse injuries also happen in people who are returning to a sport or activity after injury and try to make up for lost time by pushing themselves to achieve the level of participation they were at before injury.

Proper technique is critical in avoiding overuse injuries, as slight changes in form may be the culprit. For this reason, coaches, athletic trainers, and teachers can play a role in preventing recurrent overuse injuries.

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.

Experts also recommend parents encourage high school athletic directors to employ an athletic trainer. When athletes become injured on the field, a trainer can administer immediate care. In addition, the trainer can help determine if your child should get further evaluation from a physician. Additionally, encourage your kids to take stretching and warm-up exercises seriously and make sure student athletes are wearing protective gear that fits and provides adequate protection.

Resources

[The Campaign to Stop Sports Injuries](#)

[American Orthopedic Society for Sports Medicine](#)

[Safe Kids USA](#)

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