

Preventing kids' sports injuries: A how-to for parents

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By Kristen Gerencher, CBS.MarketWatch.com

Professional athletes and adult weekend warriors aren't the only ones sustaining sports injuries these days.

A growing number of kids are acquiring "Little League shoulder" and other sports-related ailments that, if ignored, can set them up for medical problems later in life, sports medicine experts say.

As the weather warms up, the holiday that marks the traditional kickoff to summer is also an opportunity to teach active young people how to prevent injuries while playing the physically demanding games they love.

"When they go from being indoors to playing in baseball and soccer leagues and playing a couple of sports, we do see more injuries and more overuse injuries," said Dr. Stephen Silver, a sports medicine doctor and orthopedic surgeon at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York.

Tendonitis of the knee, elbow and shoulder are among the biggest offenders as kids push themselves to continue playing at any cost, a relatively new phenomenon, he said.

"Ten years ago, there weren't many doctors who had conversations with 10-year-old players, with the coach and the trainer about when to return to play," Silver observed.

Ignoring pain brings more pain

The real danger lies with those who grin and bear it, especially kids nine to 14 years old whose "growth plates" haven't yet fused, said Dr. Robert Sallis, director of sports medicine for Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Fontana, Calif.

The classic example is a Little League pitcher who hides elbow pain long enough to affect the growth plate, a soft-tissue area that's susceptible to injury, he noted. If caught early and the child stops pitching for a while, the elbow can heal without consequence.

If not, "you can actually pull the bone away to where it doesn't heal correctly and you have permanent pain," Sallis said.

Silver agreed, saying kids who continue to play with an injured shoulder can deform the growth plate, leading to early arthritis.

Social forces at play

Each year, about 3.5 million kids 14 and under suffer sports and recreation injuries that cause them to seek medical attention, according to the National Safe Kids Campaign (NSKC).

A number of factors are converging, according to NSCK Program Director Dr. Angela Mickalide. As more parents heed warnings about inactivity and obesity in children,

they're signing up their boys and girls for organized sports ranging from swim teams to hockey leagues -- offerings that are more available now than ever, she said.

What's more, because they live in a competitive society, kids often have a single-minded drive to win as opposed to just having fun, Mickalide added.

"Children, especially as they begin to specialize in sports, become more competitive and want to play through the injury because they don't want to be taken off the team or lose their chance," she said.

As girls play with about the same frequency as boys, parents of both sexes can be guilty of applying too much pressure as well, leading kids to make unwise decisions about concealing injuries, Sallis suggested.

Girls are catching up to boys in terms of traumatic injuries as well, though facial injuries are more typical with boys, he said.

Debilitating tears to the knee's anterior cruciate ligament, or ACL, are much more common among females, though it's not known why, Sallis added. Research is now under way to develop exercises that could help prevent ACL injuries, which typically occur when girls twist or land from a jump, he noted.

How to prevent injuries

Parents can help kids avoid injuries by taking the following precautions, according to experts:

Youths should wear protective equipment in both games and practices. Shin and mouth guards; helmets for bicycling; and elbow, knee and wrist guards for inline skating all reduce the risk of serious injuries in the event of a fall or collision, Mickalide said.

Take your child for regular medical checkups to make sure he or she has full range of motion and physical strength before starting to play, Silver advised.

Make sure young athletes work their way up to playing frequently. Kids may complain of ankle pain known as Sever's disease, or from painful shins or bony bumps under the knees from Osgood Schlatter's disease if they're doing too many running or jumping sports, Sallis indicated. These conditions are often treated with rest, anti-inflammatory drugs and ice and rarely have long-term effects, but can be painful nonetheless. "They need to avoid the scenario of too much, too fast, too soon that leads to these overuse injuries," he said.

Be sun smart: Keep kids hydrated to avoid heatstroke and use sunscreen to protect them from harmful ultraviolet rays.

Make sure the games are supervised and that coaches insist on proper rest as well as field conditioning to reduce the risk of injury from extraneous rocks and stones, Mickalide added.