

HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETES

Our society puts a lot of pressure on athletes to "win at all costs." Professional and college-level athletes get sophisticated medical care for their sports injuries, but what about high school athletes?

Sports injuries in teens differ from adults

Every year, millions of teenagers participate in high school sports. Teenage athletes get injured at about the same rate as pro athletes but injuries that affect high school athletes are often different than those that affect adults. Overuse injuries such as growth plate injuries and spondylolisthesis are often seen in high school athletes as a result of inadequate rest and improper training.

Growth plate injuries: The bone structure of most adolescents is not mature, meaning there are areas of growing tissue (growth plates) near the end of long bones. These areas injure more easily than tendons and ligaments. Thus, sports activities that could cause a sprain in an adult could cause a more serious injury in a high school athlete. Growth plate injuries happen most often in contact sports like football or basketball and overuse sports like gymnastics or baseball.

Spondylolisthesis: Young athletes who over-load the spine in sports like gymnastics, weightlifting or football can develop a stress fracture on one or both sides of the bones (vertebra) that make up the spine (spondylolysis). A stress fracture that causes the vertebra to slip out of place is called spondylolisthesis.

Get prompt medical attention

All sports injuries and complaints from young athletes need prompt medical attention. Parents and coaches should not pressure athletes to work through the pain because untreated injuries can lead to permanent damage and problems later on in life. If an athlete is complaining of pain or appears to be hesitant, reluctant or unable to quickly return to sports following an injury, an evaluation by a physician with experience and expertise in sports medicine should be considered.

Generally, young athletes are anxious to return to sports, so if an injured child expresses concerns about returning to their sports activity, be aware that the child's injury has probably not been completely resolved. It is also possible that there may be a psychological or emotional reason for the child not wanting to return to sports activity and this should be investigated before the child is returned.

Sports participation should be fun, safe, and a positive learning experience. Parents, coaches, and physicians should all assume responsibility for keeping things in perspective and emphasize the physical and emotional well-being of all student-athletes above all.