



Avoiding the Pain

Maintaining your fitness level can help ward off sports-related injuries

BY MARIA BLACKBURN

One minute you're kicking the soccer ball around with your kid or preparing to tee off for your regular Saturday morning game of golf, the next thing you know you're in agony. Pain is radiating from your knee or ankle or lower back. You aren't sure what happened. All you know is that you wish it would stop.

Adults age 25 and older sustain an estimated 2.29 million sports and recreational injuries every year, according to a recent U.S. National Health Interview Survey. The injuries were both chronic and acute, caused by rough contact sports like football or more staid individual sports like golf. Some were mild enough to be treated at home; others were serious enough to require a trip to the hospital.

Whatever the sport or the injury, one factor remains the same: As you age, your chances of getting a sports injury increase, especially if you continue to play at the same intensity that you did when you were younger, says Dr. Stephen Rice, a fellow with the American College of Sports Medicine who practices pediatric sports medicine at Jersey Shore University Medical Center in Neptune, N.J.

"As you get older, it's tougher to keep your body satisfied and happy. Some of the things like the cartilage in your knees and the way in which the disks in your back are composed, they lose some of their elasticity and vibrancy," Rice says. However, getting older doesn't mean you have to sit on the sidelines.

"There's no reason you can't be active, but it takes a little more diligence on your part to keep yourself flexible, strong and aerobically fit," he says. "You have to be a little more careful about maintaining a regular activity base so that you don't get injured."

Here's a brief look at some common sports injuries and what you can do to prevent them:

ANTERIOR KNEE PAIN

What happens: Repeated knee bending during sports causes friction between the underside of the kneecap and the outside bottom of your thigh bone and creates irritation, inflammation and eventually the breakdown of cartilage. "Anterior knee pain is probably the most common problem in sports,"

says Dr. Timothy E. Hewett, a fellow at the American College of Sports Medicine and director of the Sports Medicine Biodynamics Center at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

Prevention: "Work on your body mechanics to help build up your hip musculature and gluteus maximus to help get your thigh bone into proper alignment," Hewett says. "Doing exercises such as squats, wall sits and hip abduction exercises are the single best way to keep from developing anterior knee pain."

ANKLE OR OTHER LIGAMENT SPRAINS

What happens: A fall, sudden twist or blow to the body causes a joint to be pushed in one direction, forcing the ligament to move beyond its normal range and stretch or even tear. "Usually something causes the body to move in an unusual way and that causes a ligament sprain," Rice says. Ankle sprains, more than 1 million of which occur annually in the United States, are the most common form of ligament sprains, but

injuries to the knee's anterior cruciate ligament are also common.

Prevention: Learn how to land by improving your balance. "The single best thing to do to prevent ankle sprains is to improve your balance by doing single foot, single leg balance exercises," Hewett says. "Start off by balancing on one foot with your other knee at a 90-degree angle and work up to doing this exercise with your eyes closed and with the added difficulty of a balance board."

MUSCLE PULLS AND STRAINS

What happens: A muscle or tendon gets stretched beyond its limit and tears, causing symptoms ranging from mild discomfort to severe pain. Muscle strains in the thigh are often accompanied by a popping or snapping noise.

Prevention: Make time to maintain good flexibility, and try to stretch after an episode of activity when the muscles are already warm, Rice advises. "Flexibility is important because most of the

time you are going to tear a muscle when you are trying to stretch it to an extreme," he says. And always warm up before sports. "You reduce your chances of getting yourself into trouble if you are prepared properly for your activity."

LOW BACK PAIN

What happens: Your legs support some 60 percent of your body's weight and where they join your body at the lower back can be a source of muscle soreness. Participating in sports like golf that call for lots of twisting and turning can lead to overuse of muscles surrounding your spine and stomach and cause low back pain.

Prevention: "What we think with low back pain is that it's caused by weakness of the muscles that help stabilize the trunk and spine," Hewett says. Activating these stabilizers with exercises that strengthen your body's core muscles, such as abdominal crunches, can help prevent shifting of the spine that causes low back pain, he says. ■

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