



Division of Sports Medicine

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WHY GIRLS SHOULD PLAY SPORTS

At the Division of Sports Medicine here at Children's Hospital Boston, we believe that sports are good for children in several ways. We also believe that sports may have *special* benefits for girls. These benefits can be divided into three different categories:

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Reduced risk of certain chronic illnesses: In women who were physically active as girls, there is a reduced incidence of heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and endometrial and breast cancer. Girls who play sports begin menstruating a little later than girls who are inactive. This is believed to have something to do with lower fat levels in girls who are active, and studies have shown that for every year a girl's menstruation is delayed, the risk of her contracting breast cancer as a woman is reduced by 5–15 percent.

Improved Body Composition: The epidemic of obesity in our children is in large part due to the fact that they are not physically active. Not exercising enough is particularly prevalent among adolescent girls, who, at this stage in their development, are too often taught that sports are "unladylike." Not surprisingly, kids who play sports and are physically active are much less likely to be overweight than those who are "couch potatoes."

Stronger Immune System: Moderate exercise strengthens a child's immune system by increasing the levels of various disease-fighting substances in the body, including interferon and interleukin-1. Being in shape can help a person combat diseases ranging from the common cold and flu to cancer.

Less Menstrual Discomfort: Exercising several times a week has been shown to decrease menstrual complaints in girls: their periods are more regular and they have lighter flow, a shorter duration of flow and less cramping and discomfort.

Stronger Bones: By increasing the strength and thickness of their bones when they're young, exercise helps young women avoid osteoporosis in later life. In addition to "weight-bearing" exercise (anything you do on your feet, such as running, walking and aerobic dance) strength training with weights is extremely effective at building bone strength.

ACADEMIC FITNESS

A healthy body is a prerequisite to a healthy mind. Here's how young female athletes compare to girls who don't play sports:

- They have higher grade point averages.
- They score better on their SATs.
- They have a lower risk of dropping out of school.
- They have a better chance of getting into, staying in, and performing well in college.

Girls who play high school sports significantly outperform non-athletic girls in academic subjects such as science and math that tend to be dominated by boys. This suggests that participating in sports gives girls the confidence to participate on a more equal footing in the classroom with boys.

EMOTIONAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL FITNESS

Physical activity improves girls' self-esteem, self-concept, self-confidence and perceptions of competence. Girls who are active also tend to be more optimistic, which has a direct bearing on motivation, and therefore achievement. In a recent study, 80 percent of female Fortune 500 executives identified themselves as former "tomboys."

Experts believe that it is not just enhanced fitness that improves girls' emotional and psychological health, but also the very act of participating in sports that is empowering.

With improved self-esteem come benefits that all of us parents can appreciate: a lower risk of unwanted sexual behavior and pregnancy, and reduced drug and alcohol abuse. Girls who are athletes are also less likely to smoke or to have eating disorders.

The Sports Medicine Bible for Young Athletes (SourceBooks, 2002) by Dr. Lyle Micheli is a book filled with important information about how to make a young athlete's sports experience as safe and successful as possible. Visit www.lylemichelimd.com.

This fact sheet was created by Dr. Lyle Micheli and the faculty of the Division of Sports Medicine at Children's Hospital Boston.