



Division of Sports Medicine

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PREVENTING SOCCER INJURIES

Youth soccer has exploded in popularity in the last decade or so. There is a variety of reasons for this - the simplicity of the rules; the relative lack of expense of the equipment and uniforms; and of course, its appeal to kids because it is a free-flowing sport where everyone on the team gets into the action.

Another reason for the growth of soccer is that millions of parents have supported and encouraged their children's participation because it has reputation as a relatively "safe" sport. Injury rates in soccer players under 14 years old are very low indeed. As the participants get older, injury rates increase, and that is probably inevitable given the increasing size, speed and intensity of the players. Still, adolescent and adult soccer players get injured much less often than, say, football players (one study showed that 30 percent of high school soccer players got injured compared to 85 percent on the football gridiron).

The best prevention against soccer injuries includes making sure your child has a qualified coach, undergoes a proper pre-season sports physical and uses proper equipment, especially suitable footwear.

Coaching

The most effective way to prevent sports injuries is to make sure your child is coached by a qualified person, and preferably, one who is certified by the National Soccer Coaches Association of America (NSCAA). The NSCAA offers certification at different levels, even for coaches working with players 5 to 12 years old. At the very least, your child's coach should have some training in first aid and CPR and should have an emergency plan in case of a serious injury.

Pre-sports physical

Every child should have a pre-season physical, says the American Medical Association, and according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, that physical should be sports-specific. The emphasis should be on quality, not quantity - once a year is enough if the physical is done properly.

PREVENTING SOCCER INJURIES (CONTINUED)

A properly done pre-sports physical should detect conditions that might predispose your child to injury in soccer - anatomical abnormalities such as flat feet or knock knees, for example, or lack of strength and flexibility in the low back or hamstrings. Ideally, the pre-sports physical should be done by your primary care physician, but if he or she has no experience in this area (which is becoming rarer as more and more primary care physicians get certified in sports medicine), then by all means have the physical done by a sports doctor who has had some training by either the American College of Sports Medicine or the American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine.

If the physical is performed by someone other than the family doctor, the report should be sent to your primary care physician to maintain continuity of care. The pre-season physical should ideally be performed once a year and three or four months before the season begins. This allows the physician to evaluate and correct any specific problems rather than have to improvise a remedial program at the last minute.

Footwear/Equipment

It's your direct responsibility to make sure your child plays in a good pair of soccer cleats. Old, worn-out cleats are associated with certain injuries. Make sure your child starts the season in a new pair of cleats, especially if there appears to be any wearing down in the back cleats of the shoes. Molded rubber thirteen-cleat shoes are fine for most natural grass surfaces in the U.S., but if your climate is very wet or the turf where your child plays soccer is especially thick and lush, screw-in six-cleat shoes may provide better traction. Shin guards are a must and protect against both serious injuries to the bones of the lower leg and minor but painful bruises in this area. At present, mouthguards are optional for soccer players, though they would help prevent the small number of concussions and dental injuries seen in soccer. However, the fact that mouthguards interfere with verbal communication makes it unlikely they will ever be widely adopted in this sport where players are constantly talking to one another during the course of play. Finally, make sure that any ball you purchase for your child's use in the backyard or park is sized appropriately for his or her age.

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.