



Common ice hockey injuries

Injuries are on the decline

One of the fastest growing organized sports in the United States, ice hockey is played by more than 500,000 boys and girls. In many parts of the country, kids learn to skate as soon as they can walk. Soon enough, they're joining leagues, developing their skills and enjoying the game through high school, college and beyond.

Ice hockey has a reputation for being dangerous, but rule changes and better equipment have led to a decrease in injuries over the past 15 years. Today, most hockey injuries are minor: bruises, muscle strains, ligament tears and cuts. Serious problems, like concussions, broken bones and spinal injuries, do occur in ice hockey, but they are usually the result of dangerous tactics and dirty play.



Player Safety

Common accidents, serious injuries

Concussion A blow to the head by a stick, a jolt from a fall to the ice or a head-first crash into the boards may cause a player to display the symptoms of a concussion: headaches, nausea and dizziness. Players should be removed from games or practice when they display concussion symptoms. A player should only be allowed to return to play when a medical professional determines that they have completely recovered from their concussion.

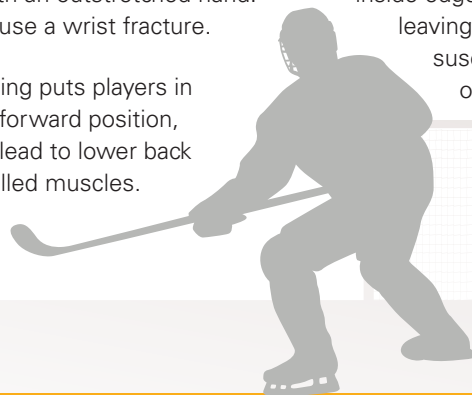
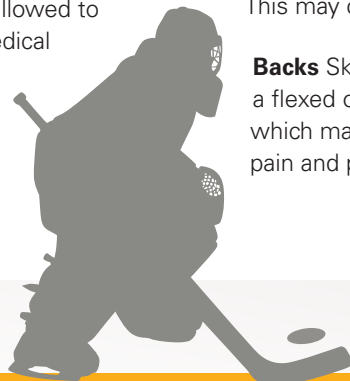
Shoulders Shoulder separations, dislocations and broken collarbones may occur from contact with another player, the boards or the ice.

Wrists When players fall to the ice or hit the boards, they often brace themselves with an outstretched hand. This may cause a wrist fracture.

Backs Skating puts players in a flexed or forward position, which may lead to lower back pain and pulled muscles.

Hips Hip checks are a big part of the game. Injuries such as hip pointers and inflammation at the bony point of the hip (trochanteric bursitis) may result from a direct blow to the outside of the hip.

Knees To skate, players push off the inside edge of the skate blade, leaving knee ligaments susceptible to sprains or tears.



Preventing ice hockey injuries

What to wear

To stay safe, young players must wear the required protective equipment. Unfortunately, ice hockey gear can be expensive. Good used equipment, however, is often available. See if your league holds a “skate swap” or if older players are offering hand-me-downs to younger players.

Here’s what every player needs:

- **Helmet** The most important piece of equipment, the helmet should include a full face mask and have a protective chin cup and a chin strap. Players should make sure the helmet fits properly and they should keep the chin strap fastened and tightened whenever they play or practice.
- **Shoulder pads, elbow pads, knee pads, shin pads and gloves** Make sure to use equipment that is specific to ice hockey. Pads made for other sports won’t offer the full protection needed to stay safe.
- **Hockey pants** Pants should have a girdle and shell with reinforced padding over the hips and in the front, rear and sides of the upper legs and midsection. To fit right, hockey pants should reach the knee.
- **Athletic supporter and cup** Essential protection for boys.
- **Neck protector** Added protection from sticks, pucks and skate blades.
- **Mouth guard** Protects teeth, lips, cheeks and the tongue. May reduce the risk of head and neck injuries.
- **Hockey skates** Make sure they fit well, have plenty of ankle support and have a steel or hard plastic toe cup. Poorly fitting or new skates can cause blisters or bursitis, so be sure to test your skates or break them in prior to the start of a new season. Also, keep skates sharp: dull blades lead to slips and falls.
- **Stick** Hockey sticks should fit the height of the player, usually with the top of the stick near the bottom of the chin. Too long or too short may lead to strains and soreness.
- **For goalies** To stay safe from flying pucks and rough play in the crease, goalies need a special set of equipment, including leg pads, arm pads, chest protector, blocker glove, catcher glove, and a helmet with face guard, mouth guard and neck protector.



How Dangerous is Hockey?

Slashing. Hooking. Roughing. Fighting.

With penalties like these, it’s no wonder some families are reluctant to let their children play ice hockey. However, full enforcement of those penalties makes the game safer to play. Young players need to understand and follow the rules, and coaches and parents should adopt a zero tolerance approach to dirty play and dangerous behavior on the ice.

Stick work Simply put, don’t use your stick as a weapon. Slashing, cross-checking, butt ending and other infractions are serious penalties in ice hockey because they can lead to major injuries.

Check yourself Checking is allowed in most leagues, but strict rules prohibit overly aggressive physical contact. Because of the risk of concussions, fractures and spinal injuries, boarding, cross-checking and checking from behind are strictly prohibited.

Also, although there are “no-checking” leagues, contact still occurs. Young players are urged to play safe in all situations.

Don’t fight it Fighting is a regular—and very controversial—aspect of professional hockey, but it has no place in youth leagues. In almost every circumstance, players who “drop the gloves” will be thrown out of a game. Fighting is dangerous, immature and hurtful to the team.

Hard and fast There are injury risks in hockey that don’t involve contact with other players. Because players skate fast on sharp blades on a frozen surface while carrying a stick and shooting a hard rubber puck, bruises, cuts and soreness are inevitable. Still, by wearing proper equipment and respecting the game’s rules, major injuries can be avoided and minor injuries can stay minor.



Reviewed by Ben Heyworth, MD, orthopedic surgeon, Boston Children’s Hospital

This piece is part of an informational series on sports injury prevention produced by the Orthopedic Center/Sports Medicine Division at Boston Children’s Hospital. For materials on preventing injuries in other sports, call 617-355-3501 or visit bostonchildrens.org/sportsmed.



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