



Common soccer injuries

Playing too much and for too long

Lots of running, combined with pivoting, jumping and kicking—that's what soccer is all about. But the near-constant movement and explosive action that define the game mean that players of all ages are susceptible to sprains, strains, bruises and even fractures to their lower bodies, especially their ankles, legs and knees.

In games and in practice, soccer players run for long periods of time with few breaks. This prolonged running, usually in cleats, can lead to overuse injuries such as muscle strains, shin splints, Achilles tendinitis and stress fractures. What's more, many players participate year-round or play on more than one team in a season. Too much play and not enough time to rest and recover can lead to chronic injuries. Overuse problems can be more severe in younger, less physically mature soccer players (younger than 13 to 15 years old).

In addition to overuse injuries, athletes can be hurt through hard contact with other players, the ball or the goalpost. Direct contact can produce joint sprains and dislocations, broken collarbones, and hand, elbow and wrist injuries. There is also increasing frequency and awareness of head trauma and concussions in soccer.



Player Safety

Common accidents, serious injuries

Heading the ball looks dangerous, but it's considered safe, provided players use proper technique. When heading, kids should keep their eyes open, be careful to avoid contact with other players when jumping to head the ball, and keep their mouths closed and their tongues away from their teeth. Heading drills are important for learning these techniques, but repetitive heading with heavier or waterlogged balls should be avoided.

Players should keep their heads up and watch out for teammates and opposing players. Young athletes should practice dribbling without looking down at the ball. They'll avoid collisions, and they'll be better players, too!



Goalies face significant risk of injury. Because they jump at balls in the air, dive at balls on the ground and play close to heavy, rigid goalposts, injuries to the head, hands and hips are common. Goalies are among the players at greatest risk of concussions, so extra attention should be paid to potential head injuries in these players by coaches, trainers and parents.



Stress fractures can occur in soccer players, particularly when they compete on hard surfaces, such as artificial turf. Wearing unsupportive or ill-fitting shoes, using incorrect playing techniques, training improperly, or training intensively after a sedentary period—like starting up in the fall after an inactive summer—can also lead to lower extremity stress fractures.

Preventing soccer injuries

Always warm up before practices and games

It's impossible to eliminate injuries from soccer, but a thorough warm-up routine is a helpful way for young players to reduce the risk of injury.

- Light cardiovascular exercise, like jumping jacks or running in place for a few minutes, gets the blood flowing.
- Slow, gentle stretching will make sure muscles are loose and ready for action. Young players should focus on the ankles, calves, knees and hamstrings, and hold each stretch for about 30 seconds.

Is the field safe for play?

- Coaches and staff should inspect the field before all practices and games. Look for holes, rocks and other obstacles. Remove trash and broken glass that could cause injury or disrupt play.
- Keep all equipment and extra balls on the sidelines and safely away from the field of play. Make sure players who are not in the game are back behind the sideline.
- Make sure goalposts are firmly in place. Players should never climb the goalposts or netting or hang from crossbars because the goal can bend or fall, resulting in serious injury. Also, goalposts should be padded to reduce risk.
- Use caution when playing in the rain and on wet fields. When possible, use synthetic, non-absorbent balls in these conditions. Leather balls tend to get waterlogged and heavy, which can cause injury.

Remove piercings and jewelry

- Earrings, necklaces, rings and other jewelry can cause cuts and tears to players when they come in contact with opponents or fall to the turf. Take off all jewelry before games and practices.

Don't be a hero

- It's tempting for players, particularly young players, to play through pain. Toughing it out, however, may lead to serious injuries. Coaches, parents and staff should bring players out of games or practices if they experience pain or cramps. Players who play while hurt not only hurt themselves—they hurt the team.



What Youth Soccer Players Should Wear

Soccer cleats

Wear shoes with molded cleats or ribbed soles, and make sure they fit properly and are laced up tight.

Shin guards

To guard against lower leg injuries, young athletes should wear shin guards that mold to the shin and run from just below the knee to the ankle bone. They also need soccer socks to hold the guards in place.

Mouth guards

Kids can protect their teeth, lips, cheeks and tongue with a fitted mouth guard.

Goalies

Goalies should wear long-sleeved shirts, pants or shorts with padding in the hips and specialized goaltending gloves to guard against injury.



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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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