

Good sports

PREVENTING AND TREATING INJURIES IN YOUNG ATHLETES

BY ANDREA VALLUZZO

Whether or not students return to school this fall, odds are many of them will be participating in some type of athletic activity, whether that includes training for a sport, going for a run in their neighborhood, kicking the soccer ball around with their family at home, or preparing for a spring league. When kids are involved in sports — no matter what the scenario — athletic-related injuries are always a possibility.

As student sports enthusiasts increasingly become year-round athletes, playing either one sport all year long or multiple sports, experts are reporting that the number of sports injuries is on the rise. According to the Centers for Disease Control, nearly half are preventable.

While acute injuries can happen anytime — a hard tackle or a misstep leading to a torn ACL or a dislocated knee — more commonly, it's overuse and repetitive strain that cause most sports injuries.

"Unfortunately, most kids, mine included, play sports all year round. Overspecialization, I think, is a problem when kids do one specific sport 12 months a year. They develop certain habits that stress only certain parts of the body and when those get overworked too much, they start developing chronic problems like tendon degeneration and a lot of overuse injuries," explains Ridgefield resident Dr. Edmund Ganal, a sports medicine specialist with OrthoConnecticut, with locations throughout Fairfield and Litchfield counties. Experts differ on whether it's better to play one sport or a variety. Some say playing one sport reduces the number of athletic injuries and the type of injuries to those specific to that particular sport while others say playing different sports can be beneficial as a form of cross-training and to not repeatedly tax the same set of muscles the same way again.

Chronic overuse and repetitive injuries can stem from a variety of factors, including improper technique or training, not enough conditioning or stretching, and a lack of sleep. Participating in sports all year long, whether it's only soccer or multiple sports, can also put young athletes at higher risk for injury as they are not allowing their bodies to rest.

"It's good to take about a month off periodically and most sports have a downtime," Dr. Ganal says. "Doing multiple sports is beneficial because you're using different muscles in different ways but you

can still get into problems if you do a lot of high impact, whether it's basketball, football or lacrosse. You're doing a lot of high impact pounding and running so you can still develop problems that way."

Dr. Michael Schwartz, an internal medicine physician from Darien Primary & Specialty Care, notes there are specific kinds of injuries related to each sport and overuse can occur even if one is playing a single sport. "The recommendation is something like no more hours per week than your age. So, if you're 15 years old and playing tennis, you should be playing no more than 15 hours a week, but of course, that doesn't happen," he says. A more likely scenario is a high school tennis player is playing at least three to four hours a day, around five days a week.

The Connecticut Children's Medical Center in Hartford has a sports medicine department that treats injuries and works with young athletes for prevention ... to increase strength of joint and muscle groups, build endurance, and coach the proper movement mechanics. "Sports injury prevention is designed to reduce the likelihood of sustaining a sports-related injury while also improving overall performance and biomechanical function across all areas of the body," according to its website.

Having a good athletic trainer for high school and college athletes can be key to prevention and early treatment of sports injuries.

Sean Cunningham, former head athletic trainer with the Miami Marlins who now works at the collegiate level, reports he is seeing an incredible amount of overuse injuries and the majority of them stem not from the activities athletes are doing but the volume of activity and the year-round activity. "Professional athletes all have an off-season, but often in youth sports, the season goes year-round, and there's no downtime — it's just go, go, go."

Among recommended strategies to prevent injuries are physical conditioning, cross training, adequate warm-up, and stretching, as well as health and wellness basics such as getting enough sleep and good nutrition. "Those components certainly play into it but at the end of the day, I think giving time for recovery and proper cross training and monitoring volume in workloads is the number one way [to avoid injury]," Cunningham adds.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends young athletes have at least one day off



Stephanie Dayton



OrthoConnecticut

Above, Dr. Edmund Ganal, a Ridgefield resident and sports medicine specialist with OrthoConnecticut, with locations throughout Fairfield and Litchfield counties, examines a young athlete's knee. Sports are a big part of many students' lives: Alessandro Sulpizi (at left), for example, is an avid athlete and former member of the New Canaan High School varsity boys tennis team under Coach Ben Young; he graduated from New Canaan High School in 2019 and currently attends Northeastern University.

per week and at least one month off per year from training for a particular sport to allow the body to recover.

With many sports injuries, pain is often the first symptom and at early onset, the athlete often tries to play through the pain. Treatment options can include modifying physical activities, taking a break from the sport, anti-inflammatories, and icing the injured area. Coaches, parents, the athlete, and the trainer or doctor should work together to develop a treatment plan.

Dr. Schwartz notes that the key is to listen to the athlete if he or she is saying something doesn't feel right. A good athletic trainer is so important at the high school level, he adds. "Athletic trainers

really understand anatomy and injuries," he says. "Not only can they identify it earlier in the evolution of the injury, but they can tell you exactly how to move forward: How long do you take off? Do you rest? Do you ice? Do you use anti-inflammatories? Do you change the motion the way someone is doing something to reduce the risk from a preventative standpoint?"

"The hardest thing is that athletes want to play right away, and when they start feeling better they're going to go out at 100 percent," Dr. Ganal concludes. "I think it's good to gradually work up to their normal playing level. I call it a walk-to-jog program, where they just ease into it over the course of a week or two, rather than a couple hours."

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