

Playing Multiple Sports Reduces Injury Risk

By Dr. Tommy John

According to the latest research, ACL surgeries in 6-to-18-year-olds are up 60 percent during the past 20 years, and more than 57 percent of all “Tommy John Surgeries” are being performed on 15-19 year olds.

Dr. James Andrews, world renowned orthopedic surgeon, recently said that more than 40 percent of his surgical practice is on kids.

Stress fractures in the spines of young athletes are commonplace among our youth, and the emotional and physical stresses young athletes are experiencing lead to anxiety and depression. Burnout is occurring not only physically in young athletes but mentally as well.

Sadly, there seems to be no end in sight. Change needs to happen and it needs to start with the youth in our country.

How do we go about creating the right environment for young athletes to be able to grow and develop into healthy and happy adults?

The answer is really quite simple, as long as parents, coaches and educators understand that the real key to having young athletes enjoy sports and stay healthy – for however long they choose to play sports – is almost entirely in their hands. That’s right – an athlete’s success is tied to the decisions made by parents, educators and coaches – and how committed they are to make sure that the happiness and wellness of the athlete comes first.

Some of the more significant concerns for parents and coaches are the following:

- 1. Don’t Push a Passion on Your Progeny:** If a child is involved in sports, it should be because the child wants to be – not because he or she has to be. To be sure of the intent, parents should consider the following four questions:
 - a. Are your children in sports because it’s convenient?
 - b. Are your children in sports because everyone else’s kid is?
 - c. Are your children in sports only because you were?
 - d. Are your children in sports because you want them to turn pro?

If a parent answers “yes” to any of the four, the chances of the child participating in the sport in which he or she may not have any

interest is much higher. Coaches and educators may have to discuss the matter with parents.

- 2. Never Over-evaluate an Athlete’s Performance:** If parents take things too seriously, they could stress out their child and trigger their sympathetic nervous system (otherwise known as the fight or flight response).

When an athlete is stressed, it causes the release of certain hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol to tackle that stress and anxiety, which pretty much shuts down the immune system and prevents healing. It’s a normal response in short-term stressful situations, but if parents are constantly evaluating their child, they may be keeping them in a sympathetic dominant state that never allows their body a chance to rest and recover.

- 3. Have an Off-season Plan When Sport Season Ends:** According to the latest research, the single biggest risk factor that predicts whether or not a young athlete gets injured is specialization or competing in one sport for more than eight months a year.

In the off-season, a game plan should be established to keep an athlete’s eagerness for a sport satisfied when he or she shouldn’t be playing it. That’s where playing other sports can help and should be encouraged. However, if athletes aren’t interested in any other sport besides basketball or soccer, they still have plenty of options to keep their love of the game satisfied:

When the season concludes, incorporating a functional movement training program (one that uses body weight movements) seven days a week is best, along with encouraging free play time or random pickup games.

Since most of the injuries experienced in today’s youth sports epidemics are degenerative in nature such as stress fractures in spines, Little Leaguer’s Elbow and torn ACLs – as opposed to traumatic injuries like broken bones, bruises and lacerations – they are almost completely preventable at this stage in their development.

The good news is that it doesn’t take as much effort as you might think, but it does take a fair amount of commitment. First, four important questions must be addressed:



Dr. Tommy John (in front) and his father, Tommy John, talk to Little League players about sports injuries at a field in North Carolina.

1. Are their extracurricular activities (when not playing sports) and habits helping them perform at their best?
2. Are they conditioning their bodies in the right way when they're not playing sports?
3. Are the foods they're eating "healing" their bodies all day long?
4. Are they getting enough time to recover, or is there an assumption that because they are young, their bodies are resilient?

In other words – **Rethink, Rebuild, Replenish and Recover.**

If parents or coaches cannot answer "yes" to all four questions, or if there is uncertainty in how to answer, then the athlete is most likely not as healthy as possible and not having as much fun as possible.

One area to rethink is relying on technology. Although the phone and computer can be time-wasters, they also affect other things that most people don't consider in terms of actual sports performance.

For one, these devices can suppress their immune system in the same way that constant stress does, since engaging with technology too often each day has been found to trigger the sympathetic nervous system (the fight or flight response). It also makes them less aware of their surroundings, so they aren't practicing awareness skills throughout the day as often as they could be. Furthermore, it inhibits their posture in a way that can actually shut down certain muscles and destroy biomechanics.

What an athlete eats is just as critical as to how he/she moves and is instrumental in recovery and repair. The following types of foods and drinks should be eliminated or greatly reduced:

- Any foods that don't rot, or that last longer than they should.
- Any foods that use artificial food coloring.

- Plain water with nothing added. (Adding a dash of Himalayan salt to every water bottle will help the body absorb and utilize more water. Otherwise, it passes through the system much faster.)
- Sports (and energy) drinks or sodas.
- Cow's milk, as well as fruit or vegetable juice.

Next, the following types of foods and drinks should be added or increased:

- Essential healthy fats, such as organic grass-fed butter, organic coconut oil, organic pastured (cage-free) eggs, raw nuts and seeds, avocados, organic pasture-raised bacon (in moderation) and organic lard (in moderation).
- Clean animal protein, such as organic grass-fed beef, organic pastured pork, free-range organic chicken, wild game or wild fish.

Overtraining Symptoms

Overtraining and overstimulation are a part of every athlete's experience; however, parents and coaches have to make sure that athletes don't stay in that catabolic state for extended periods of time.

There are several signs of overtraining, and it's important for any athlete to know when to rest and when to take time off. If an athlete experiences more than two of the following symptoms, he or she definitely needs a day or two off from the sport:

- Constant fatigue
- A lack of interest in a sport
- Irritability or moodiness (more so than usual)
- Anxiety or depression
- Loss of appetite
- Chronic joint pain and/or muscle soreness
- An increase in injuries