

Overuse Injuries and Burnout in Youth Sports Can Have Long-Term Effects

As an emphasis on competitive success in youth sports has led to intense training, frequent competition, and early single-sport specialization, overuse injuries and burnout have become common. “Not only are overuse injuries in young athletes likely much more common than is realized, but these injuries can also require lengthy recovery periods, and in some cases, they can result in long-term health consequences,” says lead author John P. DiFiori, M.D., Chief of Sports Medicine and Non-Operative Orthopedics at UCLA, and AMSSM President.

For the 60 million U.S. children and adolescents between 6-18 years who participate in some form of organized athletics, youth sports can be an enjoyable and beneficial experience, offering opportunities to increase self-esteem, peer socialization, and general fitness. However, an emphasis on competition, collegiate scholarships, and elite-level success has led to increased pressure to begin high-intensity training at young ages, often in only one sport. Consequently, overuse injuries and burnout are affecting many young athletes.

“Children grow and mature at different rates, making chronological age a poor barometer for parents and coaches to set expectations and gauge progress,” said Dr. DiFiori, Head Team Physician at UCLA. “Understanding this can be critical to a child’s self-esteem and motivation to continue participating.” Other notable findings and recommendations include:

- A history of prior injury is an established risk factor for overuse injuries that should be noted as part of each injury assessment and pre-participation examination.
- Adolescent female athletes should be assessed for menstrual irregularity as a predisposing factor to bone stress injuries.
- Early sport specialization may not lead to long-term success, and may increase risk for overuse injury and burnout. With the possible exception of early entry sports such as gymnastics, figure skating, and swimming/diving, sport diversification should be encouraged at younger ages.
- Limiting weekly and yearly participation time, limits on sport-specific repetitive movements (e.g., pitching limits), and scheduled rest periods are recommended.
- Careful monitoring of training workload during the adolescent growth spurt is recommended, as injury risk seems to be greater during this phase.
- Pre-season conditioning programs and pre-practice neuromuscular training can reduce injury rates.

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