

When is Too Much – Enough for the Young Athlete!

By Dr. Ky Kugler, ATC

Is your child competing year-round in soccer? The answer is probably yes. It should not be surprising then for you to learn that your young athlete is heading down the path for a potential serious injury and at the very least, repetitive strain injuries – also called chronic or cumulative injuries, such as tendinitis, bursitis and fasciitis.

With the present popularity of year-round training, it is to your benefit as a parent or coach/trainer of an adolescent athlete to take precautionary measures to reduce the probability of both acute and cumulative injuries. Here are just a few.

1. Work smarter, not harder. Cross-training in different sport environments that use similar muscle groups can enhance both cardiovascular demand, while allowing the young athlete to strengthen similar muscle groups without repetitive trauma to the same muscles by playing the same sport. A good example for soccer is to train young athletes by swimming to strengthen the legs and increase cardiovascular endurance for the running necessary to play soccer. Be creative, there are many activities in which the successful coach/trainer can think to cross-train. Remember to work smarter, not harder – strengthen weak muscles in order to avoid injury to them.
2. Increase flexibility by warming up both dynamically (w/ movement) and then statically stretching the muscles (w/o movement) is good injury prevention practice. Try and keep the spine in a controlled, neutral position with emphasis on abdominal muscle control and core stretching/strengthening exercises. Core stability not only prevents many injuries to the back and groin region in soccer athletes, but it also improves soccer performance. Also, don't forget to cool your athletes down by stretching after a workout. This stretching helps eliminate lactic acid build-up (muscle soreness) by "flushing" the system of workout waste.
3. Practice good nutrition and good hydration, especially in warm weather. Water is still the best choice for fluid replacement. Allow your athletes to drink when they feel the need. I guarantee that very few will drink too much and if they do, it will only occur one time. Simply, it is too uncomfortable for an athlete to do.
4. Follow one simple rule for young athletes and weight loss during exercise in warm weather. For every pound of weight (16 ounces) sweated away during practice –

drink 20 – 24 ounces of water or sports drink to guard against heat injuries. This mandatory health check is as simple as weighing in on a scale before practice and after practice. Making sure you return to your normal weight prior to the next practice, prevents almost all heat-related situations that can start off w/ mild cramps and eventually lead to death.

5. Other tips include:

- a. Avoid soft drinks (regular or diet) and flavored waters – no caloric benefit is gained and may lead to cramping and increased blood pressure.
- b. Sport drinks (Gatorade is my only recommendation as they do the most significant research as a manufacturer) can be consumed if the sport/match lasts more than one hour or if multiple matches are played in one day. Remember that all sport drinks are usually high in sugar and caffeine. Electrolyte replacement is their only benefit.
- c. Eat your fruit and vegetables, don't drink them. We lose nutritional values as we process fruit and vegetables. Most of our vitamins and minerals, along w/ essential electrolytes can be replenished by just eating right.
- d. The same holds true for smart snacks such as low-fat yogurt, raisins, unsalted nuts, and low-fat cheeses.

Working harder is not always the answer for rising adolescent athletes. The lure of sport scholarships and club level advancement can pressure all parents and coaches/trainers to train too hard.

And if you do have an acute injury, let it heal, so the injury doesn't become a chronic/cumulative injury that lingers for the entire season. I hope these few common-sense tips help and enjoy the pitch.