

ADVICE SHEET FOR CHILDREN & SPORTS

Outdoor activity is important. Your child needs it to grow and be healthy. But podiatrists often see children who have been injured. Many of these injuries are preventable, and this leaflet aims to tell you how.

WHY INJURIES HAPPEN

Some injuries are because of lack of fitness or proprioception (the ability of the body to know where it is and adjust movements accordingly). Sometimes children are thrown in 'at the deep end' when it comes to activity, and do not have the fitness or warm-up to keep up.

Try to keep active all the time, with your children. Walking is a low-risk sport that doesn't tend to cause injuries. If your children are already regularly going for long walks, then sports at school will be less likely to cause injury. Walking the dog can be a useful way to get regular exercise for all the family, walking to school, walking to the shops to buy milk, or whatever regular amount of exercise you can build into your routine. Remember that adults and children should be getting at least a half hour of exercise a day, so any way you can build that into your other routines may help put you under less pressure for time to exercise.

For younger children especially, exercises that build proprioception and balance are important. That could be something as simple as 'walking tightrope' on a low curb, balancing on one leg, or climbing a climbing frame or small tree (supervised!)

Before they do any sport, children should warm-up by doing a gentler version of what they will do. So, if they are going to go training for soccer, they should walk and then gently jog. Most people of this age will know a few 'drills' that they are expected to do for their sport- they could, perhaps, do lower-intensity, gentler sessions of these at home.

OVERUSE INJURIES

Overuse injuries are common. And one in two overuse injuries could have been prevented. Children who are overtraining can get stress fractures in their bones, or injuries to soft tissue. They particularly occur in young people aged 10-15. A person of this age should not be training more than 5 or 6 days per week. If the person shows any pain, any signs of reduced fitness, or they just aren't liking the sport any more, that amount should be reduced immediately. Get any injury checked out by a doctor, physio, or podiatrist as some injuries in this age can become quite serious. Remember to teach children to always tell you if they feel pain when they are doing their sport- many won't say anything!

If you are increasing intensity of an exercise, distance, or time spent, only increase it by 10% per week of ONE of these factors. Don't increase them all. Time spent is the biggest risk factor for an overuse injury. No more than 16-20 hours per week should be spent on sport or dancing. That's about two or three hours a day, with a day off, as a maximum, and should include ALL vigorous activity that the child does, including PE.

If they play a particular sport, or dance, particularly if they are competing, they should get 2-3 months per year 'off'. Not off exercise, just off the sport that they usually do. It can be very difficult to persuade a child athlete to do this, but their body will need time to strengthen and remodel itself. And their mind, too, should have a little time to relax. These 2-3 months do not need to be idle ones. They can just switch to other active pursuits.

IMPORTANCE OF WEIGHT BEARING EXERCISE

Some weight-bearing activities are necessary, including high-impact ones. High-impact activities in a leaflet about how to avoid injuries? It sounds odd. But a child needs weight-bearing activities to build their bones properly, and make them dense and strong. Girls especially need to do some higher-impact activities regularly, since as they get older they will lose bone density faster than boys.

You only build up the amount of material in your bones until the age of 25, and the years between age 8 and 12 are particularly important for this. As you reach age 40 or so, if you are low in calcium your body will take it from your bones, making them weaker. This accelerates in old age and after the menopause for women. The exercise your child gets now, could prevent a hip fracture in old age. That probably isn't going to sound so important to a child of 8, but they'll benefit from it later. Activities that help build your child's bones include walking, jumping (even skipping!), gymnastics, basketball, football/soccer, tennis, handball, and for teens weightlifting. Girls and women aged 7 to 20 should do one or more of these activities three days a week. Even short sessions will help. Remember, all the rules about not over-training still apply to this group. You don't want to get a stress fracture now trying to prevent a fracture later.

KEY POINTS

- Include lots of gentle constant exercise, like walking
- Encourage exercise kids do naturally, like playing football with friends, climbing, skipping, running, and playing.
- Make sure there is one rest day every week
- Don't increase intensity too quickly
- Wear whatever protective 'gear' is appropriate for your sport- mouth guards, shin protectors, and so on.
- If it hurts when you run- don't run! Stop any activity that is causing pain until you can consult a professional
- Girls should do weight-bearing activities three days a week, like camogie, tennis, gymnastics, jumping, or playing soccer or gaelic football. They should keep doing this throughout their teen years and afterwards.