

Preteens run risk with sports overload ; Overtraining, rapid growth are bad mix:[FINAL Edition]

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Full Text (410 words)

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Health

More preteen kids than ever are pounding the living daylights out of their bodies by "specializing" in certain sports too early and overtraining, a pediatric sports medicine expert reported Monday.

"We've got 7-year-olds playing on community soccer teams, club sports teams and traveling teams at the same time. Now we're treating kids for serious injuries we didn't have to worry about 10 years ago," says Paul Stricker of the Scripps Clinic in La Jolla, Calif. Stricker spoke at the American Academy of Pediatrics meeting in San Francisco.

Stress fractures, ligament tears and tendinitis are becoming much more common, he says. Rapid growth during the preteen years puts bones, muscles and tendons at high risk for injury.

"Some parents and coaches think these young kids can train like adults, and more is better." But youngsters are limited by their neuromotor development, so they can't improve beyond certain levels, Stricker says.

Last year, U.S. hospitals and doctors offices treated 2.2 million recreation-linked bone fractures, dislocations and muscle injuries in kids 5 to 14 years old, according to a report due in the November/ December issue of the Journal of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons.

But many injuries go unreported, Stricker says. Other national surveys estimate sports-related injuries in youths under 15 as closer to 3.5 million per year.

The journal report says basketball, football and soccer are organized sports leading to the most injuries in kids. Stricker thinks overtrainers in long-distance running, triathlons and gymnastics also are injury-prone.

Early warning signs of trouble are complaints about pain, or soreness that doesn't seem to go away quickly. Parents should pay attention to early trouble, he says, before children's injuries become so serious that they may be long-term or require surgery.

Some youngsters push themselves because they idolize sports heroes and think they can become stars, too, if only they train hard enough.

But sometimes, "parents are doing the pushing, trying to live their dreams through the child, hoping their kid will do what they couldn't do," Stricker says.

For parents wondering how much training is too much, and looking for ways to prevent sports injuries in their kids, the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons has a Web site at www.aaos.org. Parents can download the Prevent Injuries America! fact sheets offering specific tips.

[Illustration]

PHOTO,b/w,C.J. Gunther for USA TODAY; Caption: Disturbing trend: Lyle Micheli of Boston looks over an X-ray showing knee damage. Doctors are seeing more kids with sports- related injuries.

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