

Keeping your Soccer Player Safe

What Parents and Coaches Need to Know

John Campagna

In the thirty plus years that I have been playing soccer, I have witnessed and personally experienced a number of injuries on the field. As a physiotherapist, I now know how to treat them. But more importantly, I also know how to help prevent them.

Soccer in Canada is becoming an increasingly popular and competitive sport. But in turn, there is more risk of injury. As a new father who intends to enroll my 4-month old son in the sport (as soon as he learns to walk!), injury prevention is critical. I can't tell you the number of times I have seen young players miss a season or quit the sport altogether due to injury. Of course, there is no way to prevent a player from ever getting hurt, but there are a number of things parents and coaches can do to help prevent certain injuries and/or lessen their impact if they do occur.

Here are five helpful tips:

1 STRETCH.

I can't emphasize this one enough. Although everyone knows the importance of stretching, this is particularly relevant when it comes to young soccer players. Specifically, with the onset of puberty, children's bones grow very rapidly, but often, their muscles just can't keep up. As a result, they become more susceptible to repetitive strain injuries (see Fig.1) such as Osgood-Schlatter Disease (repetitive strain of the patellar tendon attachment to the shin bone) and Patellofemoral Syndrome (pain under

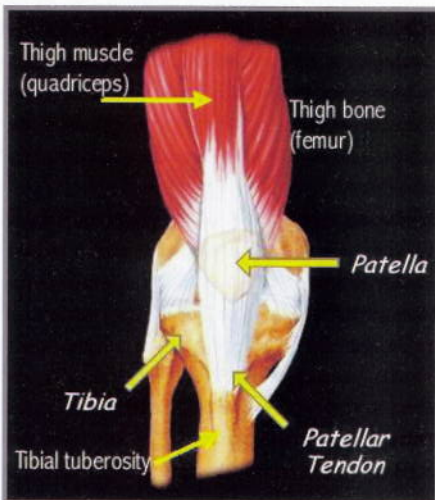


Fig. 1 - Muscular Anatomy of the knee

and around the knee cap). For prevention, it is essential to develop a good stretching routine for games and practices. Ideally, this routine would include running laps around the field for 5-10 minutes, followed by a deep stretch of the major leg muscles including quadriceps, hamstrings, calves, hip and groin, holding each stretch for 20-30 seconds. A post-game cool down could include jogging a few laps around the field to prevent sore muscles from lactic acid build up after a strenuous game.

2 PREVENT IMBALANCE.

Soccer players, young and old alike, will often develop an imbalance in their leg strength. This can result from favouring a previous injury, or simply overusing their dominant kicking leg. A good way to treat this imbalance, and make them better soccer players at the same time, is to encourage them to practice shooting and passing with the non-dominant (weaker) leg. Cristiano Ronaldo, for example, is a great player partly because he can shoot and pass with both feet. Soccer also involves a lot of pivoting, sudden starting and stopping which can lead to ACL injuries of the knee, more common with young adolescents. So coaches and trainers should constantly test players' quadriceps and hamstring strength and be aware of players complaining of their knees "giving way". When this occurs, a medical assessment is necessary and physiotherapy may be required.

3 USE YOUR BRACES AND GUARDS.

After two chipped teeth and a concussion, I can tell you first hand that I wish I had worn my mouth guard when I played soccer as a boy. Coaches and parents must also know that after any blow to the head, the child is to be removed from the game and be assessed by a doctor, **EVEN IF THEY SAY THEY FEEL OKAY AFTERWARDS.** To prevent ankle and knee injuries, braces are particularly helpful, especially for players with multiple sprains. However, it is important to remember that with multiple sprains, strengthening the muscles around the joint is the key to treatment. As for the lower leg, shin guards are now mandatory due to the high incidence of shin fractures and contusions. So always wear them.

Sports First Aid Kit

What you need to include

- ✓ First Aid Guide
- ✓ Non-aspirin & ibuprofen tablets
- ✓ An assortment of sizes of plastic and fabric bandages including elbow, knee, knuckle and fingertip bandages
- ✓ Large butterfly wound closures
- ✓ Gauze dressing pads, gauze roll bandage and first aid tape
- ✓ Porous cloth athletic tape
- ✓ Emergency blanket
- ✓ Scissors and tweezers
- ✓ Antiseptic cleansing wipes - *sting free*
- ✓ Antibiotic ointment packs
- ✓ Vinyl gloves
- ✓ Instant cold compresses
- ✓ Sterile eye pads
- ✓ Cotton tipped applicators
- ✓ Finger splint
- ✓ Triangular bandages for splinting

4 KNOW YOUR LIMIT, PLAY WITHIN IT.

I'm not advocating sports gambling here. What I am saying is that if severe and persistent pain and swelling are present, and if your child or player has difficulty walking, it is time to see a physician or physiotherapist to determine a treatment plan. Pushing through the pain will only make things worse, and may have detrimental long-term effects such as chronic joint and muscle pain.

5 BE READY FOR MEDICAL EMERGENCIES.

Coaches or trainers should have an up-to-date certification in First Aid and CPR and ensure that a completely stocked First Aid Kit is always on hand at every practice and game.

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