

## Health Tips

# The Dangers of Sports Specialization in Student-athletes

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## Sports Medicine

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Playing a beloved sport, especially on a team, can define a person's adolescent and teenage years. The rigors of physical activity, dynamics of teamwork, and journey of winning and losing shape a student-athlete.

"As an athletic trainer, I love to see kids play sports," says Katie LaRue-Martin, athletic trainer (AT). "It's so great for them developmentally. But many kids today see their favorite athletes on TV and social media and assume they perform at that level year-round. So they try to do the same—and it creates problems."

With the prevalence of club teams, along with school-sports schedules, student-athletes have the opportunity to compete in the same sport year-round. It's called sports specialization, and it can begin as early as grade school.

The trouble with playing one sport year-round, as Katie attests to, is that "students get burned out and injured if they don't take proper precautions."

## The usual suspects

What Katie has seen as an AT has been witnessed for years throughout the United States. Groups such as the **American Academy of Pediatrics** have published findings about how "sports specialization has led to an increase in overuse injuries, overtraining, and burnout." Other studies have shown that specializing in a sport puts students-athletes at a "50 percent greater risk" of injury.

"Student-athletes' bodies are still developing," says Katie. "Doing the same motions year-round puts wear and tear on muscles and bones that aren't prepared for that."

While every sport has its own risks, the sports where specialization—and overuse injuries—are most common are

- Running sports, like cross country and track
- Soccer

- Volleyball
- Tennis

Student-athletes specializing in one sport don't get the time they need to rest between seasons. The result is overuse injuries that can escalate into severe injuries, "such as a stress fracture that becomes a full-blown fracture or a tendinopathy that becomes a complete tear," says Katie.

And that means more additional healthcare costs for treatment—and more time away from competition during recovery.

The most common overuse injuries Katie sees from sports specialization are

- Tendinopathy (tiny tears in a tendon from repeated strain)
- Stress fractures
- Knee and joint pain

Katie also points to less obvious but just-as-severe issues like burnout. "There's an important psychological component to sports," she says, "and the constant pressure to compete or the disappointment of injury can be a lot on a student."

## Variety is the spice of sports

The solution, Katie encourages, isn't an off-season on the couch. Instead, she recommends letting younger athletes "sample sports," trying different ones as seasons cycle, along with cross-training, and, yes, a little rest. She also points to recommendations, endorsed by many athletic training groups, including

- Delaying sports specialization as long as possible
- Participating on one team at one time
- Practicing or training the same number of hours per week as a student's age (i.e., ten hours a week for a ten-year old athlete)

- Playing a single sport fewer than eight months per year
- Resting for two days a week
- Resting from organized sports

Katie emphasizes that resting "could include playing pick-up games during off-seasons."

## Responding to an injury

The allure of specializing in a sport is the competitive edge. But nothing can dull that edge like overuse injuries, which can largely be avoided. If you or a student-athlete suspects an injury, don't overlook it. Take them to their athletic trainer. How you relate to their advice can make all the difference.

As Katie points out, "If the AT recommends backing off or cross-training, that advice won't ruin your kid's career. It'll enhance it. Have a positive reaction to help your student-athlete have a positive reaction. Remember that we're going to help them stay active and in-shape."

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Health Tips

# The Most Treatable Cancer Men Can Be Screened For

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## Primary Care

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Prostate cancer is one of the most treatable forms of cancer. In fact, nearly 100% of men diagnosed with prostate cancer can expect to survive five or more years. As long as it's found in time.

So why don't more men schedule screenings?

## Avoidance won't cure health problems

For many men, visiting the doctor—even once a year— isn't on their to-do lists. Some, if they're honest, may not even know the last time they visited one. "Men are notorious for not getting regular check-ups at a doctor's office," said Dr. Austin Williams, a family physician. "I see a lot of guys in their 40s and 50s who haven't seen a doctor since they were 10 years old."

Seeing a doctor does not lessen a man's "manliness," and they certainly don't earn a trophy for skipping out on preventative health. Health risks can quickly compound as months turn to years and years turn to decades of avoiding the doctor.

This is especially true for risks like prostate cancer.

## Catching it early makes all the difference

Prostate cancer is one of the most common cancers among men. It's highly treatable and has a high survival rate—if it's detected and treated. Depending on your age and risk factors, your doctor may recommend a screening. Screenings are performed typically when they turn 50, even if they're not having symptoms.

For men with a high risk for prostate cancer (such as African-American men and men with a father, brother, or son diagnosed with prostate cancer before age 65), the discussion should

happen at age 45. For men with more than one close male relative (father, brother, son) with prostate cancer diagnosed before age 65, it changes to age 40.

"Screenings include a prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test and a digital rectal exam," says Dr. Jorge Arzola, a urologist. "The screening is repeated every one to two years, depending on the PSA level."

A primary care physician can complete this quick exam. And a screening doesn't mean your doctor thinks you have prostate cancer. Preventative medicine is essential, especially when it could catch such a treatable cancer in its early stages.

## When to schedule a screening

If you have any symptoms of prostate cancer, talk to your primary care physician as soon as possible. They can help you decide if a screening is best for you.

Symptoms include

- Problems urinating, including a slow or weak urinary stream or the need to urinate more often, especially at night
- Blood in the urine
- Trouble getting an erection
- Pain in the hips, back, chest, or other areas
- Weakness or numbness in the legs or feet
- Loss of bladder or bowel control

These symptoms can be related to other conditions, but it's better to rule out prostate cancer early rather than allow it to progress to a stage where it's no longer as easily treated.

More than 2 million men living in the U.S. today are prostate cancer survivors. Early screening and treatment could save your life like it did theirs.

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