

Sports Injuries in Adults



PARTICIPATION in sports can be beneficial to adults of all ages — from college students to grandparents. In fact, the only disadvantage of an active lifestyle may be the possibility of injury. If physical activity is part of your lifestyle or even if your activities are limited to weekends and vacations, you may risk pulling muscles, fracturing bones, tearing ligaments or experiencing other injuries of the musculoskeletal system.



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*Orthopedic Surgery and
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Common sports injuries

There are two broad categories of sports-related injuries — acute and chronic. Acute injuries occur from a single, well-defined incident, such as dislocating your shoulder during a fall or twisting your ankle while running. Sprains and dislocations are typically considered acute.

Chronic injuries result from an accumulation of damage to the bones, joints, muscles, ligaments and tendons. Chronic injuries are generally considered lifestyle-threatening injuries — that is, they inhibit your ability to perform many of your normal activities. Tennis elbow and stress fractures (a fracture caused by repeated stress on the bone) are both examples of chronic injuries.

Common sports injuries include:

Fractures. Sometimes known as broken bones, fractures can be either acute or caused by repeated stress on the bone or joint. In either case, a fracture may require care by an orthopedic specialist to minimize further damage and promote proper healing.

Dislocations. Just as their name suggests, these injuries occur when the end of a bone becomes displaced — or dislocates — from its position in a socket. The shoulder, in particular, is susceptible to this type of injury, especially during contact sports or as a result of falling on an outstretched arm. The injury not only affects the joint, it also affects the muscles and other soft tissues that surround and support the joint. This causes pain and instability, which may take several weeks to heal.

Sprains and strains. A sprain occurs when ligaments, which hold the bone ends together in a joint, become stretched or torn. A strain, in contrast, refers to the twisting, tearing or pulling of either the muscles or the tendons, the fibrous cords that connect muscle and bone.

Tendonitis. This occurs when the tendons become inflamed due to repetitive stress.

Rotator cuff tears. The rotator cuff — which is comprised of four muscles and their tendons — surrounds the shoulder, providing strength and stability. This area can become damaged from repeated stress or injury.

Knee injuries. The knee, perhaps more than any other joint, is associated with sports injuries. This is due in part to its role in weight bearing during activities such as running, as well as its distinctive structure, which includes ligaments that hold the thighbone and shinbone together. Anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) tears, posterior cruciate ligament (PCL) tears and injuries to the cartilage (meniscus) can all produce pain, swelling and instability of the knee.



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Musculoskeletal Medicine*

Orthopedic Surgery

Michael W. Weiss, M.D.
D. Kelly Agnew, M.D.
William D. Abraham, M.D.
Trenton M. Gause, M.D.
Thomas S. Muzzonigro, M.D.
Robert L. Waltrip, M.D.
S. Joshua Szabo, M.D.
H. James Pfaeffle, M.D., Ph.D.

Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation

James L. Cosgrove, M.D.
Judith H. Esman, M.D.
Edward D. Reidy, M.D.

Locations

North Hills • Butler
Cranberry/Mars • Aspinwall

Contact us

Toll free at 1-866-874-7483

www.tririversortho.com
info@tririversortho.com

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When to see your doctor

Many sports injuries can be prevented with proper stretching and conditioning, through the use of sport-appropriate protective equipment and by paying attention to your body when it starts to hurt. The nature of sports injuries is such that even vigilant, highly conditioned athletes sometimes get hurt.

Many injuries can be treated at home using the RICE method — rest, ice, compression and elevation. Other injuries are serious and require medical attention to promote proper healing and prevent further damage. Signs that your injury requires care by a physician include:

- **An obvious change in the appearance of a limb or joint.** Instability, excessive swelling and other changes in the way the injured area looks or functions are indications that your injury should be evaluated by a physician as soon as possible.
- **A lack of improvement.** Symptoms like pain and swelling that do not improve or that seem to get worse within 24 to 48 hours are signs of a more serious injury. Also, an inability to put weight on the injured limb or joint within a day or two is an indication that the injury requires medical care.
- **Recurrent or persistent symptoms.** It's advisable to seek medical attention if you seem to re-injure the same area frequently or if symptoms — even mild ones — persist for more than six weeks.

Diagnosis and treatment of sports injuries

Your doctor will ask about your symptoms and conduct a physical examination of the affected area. An X-ray also may be needed to rule out or confirm the presence of a fracture or other injury to the bone and soft tissues. Treatments for sports injuries may include:

- The use of a splint or cast to stabilize the area and promote proper healing
- A physical therapy or home exercise program to promote healing and strength
- Limiting activities until the affected area can heal fully
- Medications to reduce symptoms such as pain and swelling
- Arthroscopic surgery to treat some conditions, such as torn cartilage, that affect the joints
- Surgery as needed to repair damaged bones, ligaments, tendons and muscles

The outlook for injured athletes

If you experience a sports-related injury, your chances of recovering fully and resuming your activities are increased if you seek prompt medical care, follow the recommended treatment plan closely and work gradually to rebuild your strength and conditioning.