

Returning to Soccer after Injury

By Christie Heikes, M.D.

Getting Started

After injury, soccer players should have normal motion, strength and walking gait before returning to training for soccer. A cross training regimen is recommended before return to any training that requires running. Cross-training provides the cardiovascular fitness required for running and eventually for return to the soccer field.

Basic Principles

Basic principles for return to soccer include a gradual increase in activity beginning with cross training, then running, followed by ball drills and finally game participation. It is important to ensure a proper level of fitness is achieved before return to play.

Gradually increase distance, frequency and intensity of activities. Some discomfort can be expected; pain should be avoided. The running progression is too rapid if there is pain at night, if pain is present at the start of a run and worsens throughout, or alters gait or stride. Avoid worn out shoes, running and playing on hard surfaces, a sudden increase in training or excessive practice or play.

Over time, activity can increase. Intensity and sprinting can begin after meeting distance or time goals set for return to soccer. Cutting and pivoting maneuvers are then added to practice gradually followed by ball drills and shooting, with the goal to return to scrimmage and game participation.

Injury Prevention Strategies

The key to injury prevention is listening to your body - remember you are attempting to return to soccer which is a physically demanding sport.

Train consistently - Running consistently will improve overall fitness for practice and games while inconsistent training can lead to injury. For example, after missing several days of training make the next few days easier (shorter duration and intensity) before starting right back at the same distance and intensity.

Follow the hard-easy concept of training - The intensity of training should start to increase only after a good base of training runs and a steady cross training regimen has been maintained. Try not to start rapidly increasing the speed of training and adding sprinting drills until a base of cardiovascular and training fitness has been established; this usually takes six weeks. Once hard and intense training is added, do not train hard on consecutive days to avoid re-injury.

Include cross-training - Cross-training not only provides variety to any work-out routine but can provide valuable training of muscle not normally utilized while playing soccer, giving tired muscles and joints time to recover. Cross-training additionally provides cardiovascular benefits.

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Maintain proper nutrition - Eating a well balanced diet and staying properly hydrated facilitates overall health and provides the body with building blocks necessary to keep muscles strong and repair any damage.

Maintain proper equipment- Monitor mileage on shoes and cleats; running shoes lose their cushion and support after 300-400 miles. Additionally, shoes worn while wet may provide only 30-50% of their regular shock absorbing capacity. Cleats are often lacking in cushion and support so limitation in their use when practice and play situations permit can also help.



Christie Heikes, M.D.
Orthopedic Surgeon

Orthopedic surgeon, Christie Heikes, M.D., earned her medical degree and completed a residency in orthopedic surgery at the University of Minnesota. Dr. Heikes also completed an Orthopedic Sports Medicine Fellowship with Minnesota Sports Medicine prior to becoming a physician member.

While at the University of Minnesota, Dr. Heikes competed in track and cross country. Her experience and continued activity level gives her a strong understanding of the unique challenges that face athletes and active females of all ages.

Dr. Heikes sees patients at Twin Cities Orthopedics in Eden Prairie, Minn., the University of Minnesota – Riverside, and at Fairview Southdale Hospital in Edina.

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Minnesota Sports Medicine (MSM) provides sports medicine services and resources to Minnesota's athletic community. MSM is the official sports medicine provider for the Minnesota Youth Soccer Association.

To schedule an appointment with Dr. Heikes, please call 612-273-4800. To learn more, visit www.mnsportsmed.org