

Score Points with Pre-Season Strategy

Medical advice for common questions

By Steve Elias, M.D.

Soccer players who don't plan ahead for fall practice and games miss the chance to improve performance and remain injury free. Most medical experts agree: smart pre-season and early season conditioning pays off in-season. Dr. Steve Elias, a sports medicine specialist and member of Minneapolis Sports Medicine Center, answers common sports medicine questions.

What's the best way to prepare for the fall soccer season?

Slow down and ease in to play. Players and coaches alike are eager to start the season, often leading to injuries that are a result of too much, too soon. Many youth don't understand the concept of training for sports, or transitioning from summer to fall activities. The good news is that most soccer injuries can be prevented. Research shows that proper pre-season and in-season sport-specific training can help to improve performance and reduce, even eliminate, the number of soccer-related injuries by as much as 25 percent.

Symptoms of "too much, too soon" often surface early in the season, and include ankle, shin and knee pain. Proper warm up and cool down, stretching, rest, ice and practices 60 minutes in length are remedies for early complaints. Pain lasting more than one week warrants a visit to a doctor.

What's the difference between muscle soreness and a muscle injury?

Muscle soreness, also known as delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS), usually is the result of strenuous exercise, particularly in athletes who are untrained or de-conditioned. Symptoms include stiffness, swelling and soreness that occur anywhere from 48 to 72 hours after activity. There are a number of theories about the cause of muscle soreness: some sports medicine specialists attribute soreness to microscopic tears while others credit it to a lactic acid build-up.

Muscle injuries typically occur suddenly and result in immediate pain. Symptoms may include pain with use, a sudden burning sensation, pain between joints or deformity in the area of the muscle.

When should I use ice?

Ice or heat: what's better when it comes to injury? When in doubt, use ice. Ice will not irritate an injury whereas heat can. Ice helps to relax muscle spasm, produces an anesthetic-like effect and decreases the metabolic activity in the injured area. Massage the area with ice for 15 to 20 minutes. Remove and reapply in one hour. A good rule of thumb is to ice the injury as quickly as possible. Injuries receiving ice one hour or later after initial pain have been shown to be slower to heal.

When is the best time to stretch?

Stretching after the body is warm or following activity is shown to increase joint range of motion, prevent injury and enhance performance when sport-specific. Further, evidence shows that stretching throughout the day can help to promote muscle growth. Leg muscles that include the thighs, calves and buttocks should be stretched following soccer practice and games. Hold pain-free stretches for 20 to 30 seconds. Avoid "buddy stretching," or using a partner to stretch as it may promote overstretching.

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What's best: water or a fluid replacement drink?

Adequate fluid intake before, during and after exercise is crucial to preventing dehydration and maintaining performance. In general, use water at events of 60 minutes or less. Sports drinks may improve endurance when used at events lasting two hours or longer. Choose sport drinks that contain six to nine percent carbohydrate, promote rapid fluid absorption and taste good to the athlete. Such drinks can be homemade: juice diluted with water or Kool-aid with a little salt added. It's best to test sports drinks during training.

Dr. Steve Elias is a pediatrician specializing in sports medicine and is the medical director for the Scwhan's USA Cup Soccer Tournament in Blaine, Minn. He sees athletes at the Columbia Park Medical Group Pediatrics and Sports Medicine and is a member of the Minnesota Sports Mediciner. The Minnesota Sports Medicine provides services and resources to Minnesota's athletic community. For more information or an appointment with a sports medicine physician, call 612-273-4800 or visit www.mnsportsmed.org.