

Overdoing It

by Cindy Kuzma

More young athletes are getting major-league injuries.

Track athlete Kathryn W. loves to hurdle, and she's good at it. The Batavia, Ill., native won the state championship for the 300-meter hurdles in May 2010, at the end of her senior year.

She achieved that victory despite having a torn tendon in her hip. By the championships, it hurt so much she could hardly walk. "It was a dramatic season-it was a roller coaster," she says. One month after the state meet, she was in surgery.

During a tryout for his high school team last winter, pitcher Jeffrey S., 14, felt a sharp pain in his elbow. "After that, I couldn't feel three of my fingers in my left [hand]," says the Mount Pleasant, S.C., teen. It turned out his elbow was fractured. His surgeon inserted two screws to fix it.



Courtesy of Kathryn W.
Injuries affected Kathryn W.'s senior year.

Kathryn and Jeffrey are among the 2 million young athletes in the U.S. who get hurt each year. You might think of sports injuries as sudden: You trip and twist your ankle, say. But those two teens developed overuse injuries, which occur when the stress from running, throwing, or another repeated motion adds up over time. Eventually, your muscles, bones, joints, or ligaments can't handle the strain.

"These are injuries where you typically don't remember one specific instance where you hurt yourself," says Tamara McLeod, an athletic trainer and associate professor at A.T. Still University in Mesa, Ariz. At first, you might just feel tired, sore, or stiff. Over time, your pain gets worse.

"When overuse injuries are ignored for too long, they can become difficult to fix and sometimes can affect you for the rest of your life. Your best bet is to get an injury treated early," says Benjamin Domb, Kathryn's doctor.

Too Much, Too Soon

Once mainly seen among professionals, overuse injuries now make up about half of all injuries among teen athletes, according to the National Athletic Trainers' Association. Experts there believe if teens rested more and had the right training, half of teens' overuse injuries could be prevented.

There are many reasons why more teens are experiencing overuse injuries, says Dr. Theodore Ganley, sports medicine director at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Instead of playing baseball in the spring and basketball in the fall, young athletes are specializing in one sport. They're hoping to get college scholarships or go pro, but they're stressing their bodies in the same way over and over.

What's more, many teens play both for their school team and a club team. So they might play all year without breaks or practice five nights a week instead of three. That's dangerous because the body needs some downtime to heal and get stronger.

Rest Is Best

In fact, rest prevents and is the first treatment for many overuse injuries. If you feel tired, unusually sore, or in pain during a practice or an event, take a break and tell your coach or parents. "Pain is your body's way of saying 'Stop!' before something goes wrong," says Dr. Kevin Walter, program director at the Children's Hospital of Wisconsin sports medicine program.

Of course, it's hard to sit out when you're afraid of letting your teammates down or missing an important event. "As athletes with competitive spirits and determination, it is not in us to give up, but we must take care of our bodies and think of our futures," Kathryn says.

Consider this: Taking time off to heal early on can help you perform better when it counts. For instance, missing a few practices during your freshman year could ward off injuries your senior year, when college recruiters are watching, says David Geier, Jeffrey's doctor.

Your doctor may have additional ideas for changes you can make. "When I'd go to practice and even the games, whether I was pitching or playing outfield or playing first base, I'd never stretch or ice afterward," Jeffrey says. Now, he stretches and does strengthening exercises. He also limits the number of pitches he throws, which decreases his risk of arm injuries. In any sport, you can prevent injuries by using the right equipment, following your coach's instructions about form, and slowly building up your level of activity over time.

Back in the Game

If your injury gets as bad as Kathryn's or Jeffrey's, you might need treatment, including surgery. Now at East Carolina University, Kathryn will be sprinting and pole-vaulting this year, but not hurdling-it's too hard on her hips.

Jeffrey is also on the mend. Surgery was scary and painful, but he now realizes how much his injury held him back. Three months later, when he could throw and hit again, his elbow felt new. "I could see that I would be able to do so much more with it, now that it was repaired," he says.



Paul Bardbury/Getty Images

Check Out These New Moves

Don't let a fear of injuries keep you from reaping the benefits of physical activity. Whether you're a seasoned athlete or just getting started, mix up your routine with these fun ways to boost fitness.

Martial Arts



Jun Tsukuda/Aflo/Getty Images

Traditions such as judo, karate, and tae kwon do build confidence and strength while burning calories.

Zumba



Christiana Care Health System

This combination of Latin music and dance moves gets your heart pumping-and it's fun!

Frisbee



Lane Oatey/Getty Images

Toss a disk with friends, or join a team playing Ultimate Frisbee.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What injury did Kathryn suffer?

- A. a fractured elbow
- B. a torn tendon in her hip
- C. a torn ligament in her leg
- D. a broken hip

2. What has caused the increase in the number of young athletes suffering from overuse injuries?

- A. Young athletes are specializing in one sport.
- B. Young athletes are not doing enough stretching.
- C. Young athletes have a tendency to be more risky in their activities.
- D. Young athletes have a high threshold for pain.

3. What advice do you think the author would give to a teenage athlete?

- A. Try your best to get a college athletic scholarship.
- B. Be sure to rest and pay attention to any pain you feel.
- C. In order to improve, do more of your sport/activity of choice.
- D. As long as the pain isn't too bad, take Advil and see if it gets better.

4. Read the following sentence:

"Instead of playing baseball in the spring and basketball in the fall, young athletes are specializing in one sport."

In this sentence the word **specializing** means

- A. playing multiple sports in a year
- B. learning and studying a sport
- C. concentrating on one particular sport
- D. picking a strategy for learning a sport

5. The primary purpose of this passage is

- A. to describe why more young athletes work hard to get college scholarships
- B. to point out that coaches don't pay enough attention to their athletes' injuries

- C. to argue for why there should be changes to high school athletics programs
- D. to describe the causes and effects of overuse injuries in young athletes

6. What is an "overuse injury"?

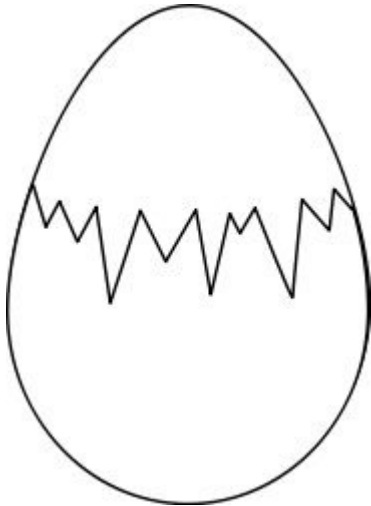
7. Why do you think a young athlete might resist a prescription to rest or sit out from a few games?

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Many young athletes love playing sports, _____ they need to be careful not to overuse their muscles and joints.

- A. because
- B. but
- C. so
- D. after

9. Which picture below most likely represents a fracture?



10. If you wear a helmet or pads, would that increase or decrease the likelihood that you would fracture a bone while playing a sport?