

# Back Pain in Young Athletes

## WHAT IS BACK PAIN?

Back pain is characterized by pain and stiffness in the back. Low back pain is the most common type of back pain seen in children and adolescents. The pain may be located in the center of the back over the spine bones, to the side of the spine or both. The pain may travel down the leg and/or include buttock pain. It can feel more like stiffness and it may cause limited motion and muscle spasms. Lower back pain is also known as lumbago, lumbar back pain or mechanical back pain.

There are many possible causes of back pain. Pulled or strained muscles are one of the most common causes of back pain. Spondylolysis is a type of spine bone fracture that can cause lower back and buttock pain in young athletes, especially when leaning backwards. Other causes of back pain can include sprained ligaments, stiff joints or small tears in the discs (herniated discs). Scoliosis, a condition where the spine is curved, can also cause back pain.

## WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS?

Symptoms of back pain can be different for each individual. Some of these include:

- ✓ Increasing pain with bending or movement, including participating in sports
- ✓ Relief of pain with rest
- ✓ Relief of pain with anti-inflammatory medication
- ✓ Pain that travels down the buttocks and leg or down the arms and fingers
- ✓ Numbness or tingling in the legs, feet, hand or fingers

## HOW DO YOU DIAGNOSE IT?

Your healthcare provider may obtain x-rays of the back to learn more about the patient's bone structures. An examination of the back and legs will also help decide the cause of back pain.

## HOW DO WE TREAT IT?

Most children experiencing back pain will recover quickly, usually within 2-6 weeks. The most common forms of treatment include:

- ✓ Period of rest
- ✓ Abdominal and back exercises/stretching
- ✓ Physical therapy, icing after activity
- ✓ Over-the-counter pain medications and regular exercise.

In most cases of back pain, it is not good to completely stop activities; the pain will generally subside faster if the patient stays active. However, in some cases your doctor may recommend limiting or changing your activities.

## WHO GETS IT, AND CAN IT BE PREVENTED?

Anyone can experience back pain. Certain activities can increase the chances for back pain, like difficult physical work or heavy lifting. Young athletes who do a lot of bending and twisting from the back, such as gymnasts, cheerleaders, divers, football players and wrestlers may be at higher risk for the back bone injury known as spondylolysis. Being overweight, or obese, can also cause low back pain.

**References:** Children's Hospital Colorado Sports Medicine Program for young athletes, American Academy of Pediatrics & American Medical Society of Sports Medicine