

Five most common sports-related injuries, and how to recover from them

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Get in shape before tackling a new sport. Learn proper technique. And don't overuse your muscles. That's what Dr. Raza Awan, a sports medicine doctor and rehab medicine specialist, suggests to his patients.

"When you're young you can get away with playing sports to keep fit," says the medical director of Synergy Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation.

"But when you're older, you have to keep fit in order to play sports."

Before diving into a sport, he recommends pre-habilitation — seeing a physiotherapist to learn the demands of the sport and address any imbalances or weaknesses in the body.

When you're on the field, use proper form. And don't play the same sport on consecutive days, because muscle overuse can result in injury, says Awan, who encourages patients to cross-train instead.

The Star spoke with Awan about the most common injuries at his clinic and what usually causes them.

When injured, he says, stop doing anything that aggravates the pain and focus on recovery, which takes about six to eight weeks for these injuries, except ankle sprains, which heal in three to six weeks. Instead, try one of the alternatives to stay fit without causing further harm.

Tennis elbow

Cause: Racquet sports, fencing and weightlifting.

Symptoms: A dull ache on the outside of the elbow, and sharp pain from grabbing something, such as a coffee cup.

Treatment: Relieve pain and inflammation with the RICE method: Rest, Ice, Compress and Elevate. A forearm strap will relieve pressure from the elbow. Acupuncture can reduce pain, physiotherapy will help stretch and strengthen forearm muscles and steroid injections help acute inflammation.

Alternatives: Anything that doesn't involve a power grip, such as cycling, running or swimming.

Rotator cuff tendinitis

Cause: Overhead sports, such as tennis, volleyball, swimming, baseball and weight lifting. Weight lifters who focus on their chest and bicep muscles and neglect the back — sometimes referred to as having a Cadillac in the front, Volkswagen in the back — can cause an imbalance in the shoulder that results in rotator cuff problems.

Symptoms: A dull pain in the shoulder or upper arm when reaching up or sharp pain when lifting something heavy. Sleeping on the affected side can exacerbate the pain.

Treatment: Physiotherapy can strengthen the shoulder and shoulder blades. Injected steroids may also help.

Alternatives: Biking, elliptical training, running.

Runner's knee and jumper's knee

Cause: These two are often related. Runner's knee involves softening of the cartilage behind the kneecap, while jumper's knee is inflammation of the tendon below the kneecap. Causes include running, basketball, volleyball and soccer.

Women who suddenly take up exercise are susceptible to this type of injury because they often have weak hip muscles, which causes an imbalance in the knees.

Symptoms: A dull ache around the front of the kneecap, or a sharp pain below the kneecap. Pain intensifies when the knee is bent and under pressure, such as when going up and down stairs.

Treatment: Physiotherapy stretches and strengthens the knee and hip areas. You can use a knee brace to help the kneecap track properly.

Alternatives: Swimming, core exercises or upper-body weight training.

Ankle sprain

Cause: Sports where you jump and change directions suddenly, such as basketball, volleyball, soccer, football and tennis.

Symptoms: As the ankle twists, you may feel a snap or a pop. Within days, there is swelling on the outer ankle and/or bruising, often accompanied by pain. (If you can't put weight on the foot or are limping, you might have a broken bone.)

Treatment: The RICE method is key. Physiotherapy reduces swelling and increases range of motion. An ankle brace or crutches may be recommended. Because the ankle ligament usually heals in a lengthened position, it can be loose and easily sprain again, so it's key to build strength and single-leg balance.

Alternatives: Sports with little ankle motion such as cycling, swimming, upper-body weight training and core exercises.

Achilles tendinitis

Cause: Running and sports with lots of running, such as soccer and basketball.

Symptoms: A dull ache at the back of the ankle that worsens with activity, such as climbing stairs. (A really sharp pain — often described by patients as being whacked with a two-by-four — may signal a tear.)

Treatment: A heel lift in the shoe can prevent the tendon from stretching. Rehabilitation involves stretching out the back of the leg, especially the calf and the hamstring. Sometimes, orthotics can provide arch support.