Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

A Healthy Game Plan for Active Individuals

While a healthy active lifestyle is an important and desirable part of life for individuals of all ages, it's important to recognize that sports-related injuries can be a reality for anyone who participates in physical activities.

So, whether you're playing an organized team sport, pick up with your friends, biking, jogging, or just playing with your kids, body awareness, sports safety and preparation should be an essential part of your game plan to help avoid injuries.

Body awareness

While most of us are aware of the risk of injuries that are the result of a collision or violent incident leading to an emergency room visit, injuries can also occur over time from regular physical activity.

Below are a few examples of the more common sports injuries:

Shin splints. Shin splints are pains in the front of the lower legs caused by exercise, often following a period of inactivity. There are different types of shin splints that commonly affect runners and those playing sports that running is a major part of:

Anterolateral shin splints result in pain around the front of the shin. This can happen immediately if your heel hits the ground in an unusual way.

Posteromedial shin splints cause pain in the inner part of the shins. A week of rest with twice-a-day, 20-minute ice treatments is the recommended home treatment for shin splints.

While this type of injury is usually not serious, if pain continues even with rest, or you think that there may be something else affecting your leg, you should contact a medical care professional.

Achilles tendinitis. The *Achilles tendon* is the tough sinew that attaches the calf muscle to the back of the heel bone. Achilles tendinitis is a common injury in sports that require running or jumping (volleyball or basketball for example). If injured, the Achilles tendon would feel tender when squeezed.

This injury can lead to a tearing or rupture of the tendon, so, if you have tenderness around the Achilles tendon that gets worse with activity, you should contact your medical care professional immediately for an evaluation.

Lower back pain. Lower back pain is common in sports that require twisting or lifting and is often caused by not being properly warmed up or moving or picking things up in an improper manner.

In some cases, back pain may subside within one week from the first time you noticed the pain. Usually, minor back pain should clear up in another four to six weeks.

It is commonly thought that bed rest is the only home treatment for lower back pain. While rest is important, lying in bed is actually not the recommended route to recovery, but you should reduce participating in your normal activities for the first few days of pain in order to reduce inflammation. Apply ice for the first two or three days, using heat after that. You can also consult a pharmacist see which over the counter medications may help you feel more comfortable.

If you have other medical symptoms such as swelling or redness of the back or spine, weight loss or pain traveling down to below your knees or any other unusual, accompanying conditions, you should contact your medical care professional as soon as possible.

It is also advisable to seek medical consultation if you have never been examined for back pain before, or, if the pain intensifies or lasts longer than a few weeks.

Tennis elbow. This injury is caused by repetitive twisting of the forearm and/or wrist, like the motion involved in the swinging of tennis or other racquets. Despite the name, tennis elbow can be caused by other, repetitive similar motions that involve the forearm, wrist and/or elbow in non-racquet sports.

Soreness, pain, inflammation on the outside of the upper arm near the elbow are the common symptoms of tennis elbow. These signs can be caused by a partial tear of the tendon fibers, which connect muscle to bone.

Immobolization and rest are the most common home treatments for mild tennis elbow. Over the counter anti-inflamatory medication may also help, so a visit to your local pharmacist may be in order.

If pain or discomfort continues after a rest period, you should seek medical consultation. Tennis elbow caught early can usually be medically treated with non-surgical procedures.

Swelling of the knees and/or knee pain. There are many causes for common knee pains that result in swelling such as improper warm up, poor form while running or performing other aspects of sports and physical activity over time. Being out of shape or overweight can also contribute to occurrences of common knee pains.

Minor, uncomplicated knee pains that result in swelling can be treated at home by avoiding activities that aggravate pain and force you to put excessive weight on the sore knee. Icing is the most common self-care method. On the first day of discomfort, you can ice the sore knee every hour for up to 15 minutes at a time. After the first day, you should try to apply ice at least four to five times a day (again for only up to 15 minutes at a time). If possible, you may also want to keep your knee elevated as much as possible.

The most common sports injuries involve the knees, and it’s important to be aware that the recovery time from serious knee problems or surgery can be long and difficult, Minor knee pain can be the sign of more serious problems including tendinitis, arthritis, torn cartilage and dislocation of the kneecap.

So, with this in mind, you should call your medical care provider if, after the first few days of rest, ice and elevation:

- The pain does not subside or reduce in the knee
- You have continued difficulty putting weight on your knee
- You experience sharp pains while not putting weight on your knee
- Your knee buckles or locks
- You have numbness, swelling or discoloration in the calf below the injured knee

As anyone who participates in physical activity knows, each sport or recreation has its own unique, physical demands and therefore can lead to other, specific injuries. No matter what ails you, a temporary rest from activity is the first step in recovery. While "playing hurt" may seem like the thing to do, repetitive injuries that are not taken care of, rested or treated can lead to long-term problems and an inability to participate in activities.

Sports safety

Sports safety has to be about more than the obvious, such as always wearing helmets and appropriate padding when biking or inline skating. It’s about taking an intelligent approach to how you participate
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in all activities, being prepared and properly equipped.

Active individuals should:

- Approach new activities carefully and with patience, taking the time to learn the skills and rules needed to enjoy safe exercise;
- Ensure that facilities, areas or equipment where you participate in activity are safe. This applies to both indoor and outdoor activities;
- Wear approved, protective equipment whenever appropriate. (Helmets for cycling, scooters, skate boards, inline skating, ice skating, hockey, skiing and snowboarding, and lifejackets for paddling and water activities…);
- If applicable to the sport you play, wear the appropriate eye and teeth protectors;
- Make sure to wear comfortable clothing and footwear that suits the activity and the weather;
- If you are playing outdoors, use sunscreen during the summer;
- Make sure to drink and replenish fluids, especially during summer, outdoor activities; and
- Always follow the particular rules and safety guidelines of the sport or activity you are participating in.

Additionally, if you're participating in an organized sports league or association, be sure to visit the website of the group that is organizing the game or event to ensure that they have a set of established rules designed to ensure safety. You should also carefully read and understand any waiver/agreement you are required to sign before participating in any event.

Preparation

While there are no guarantees that you will not be hurt while participating in you favorite sport or activity, being physically prepared can go a long way to avoiding injuries.

Stretch before, during and after activities. And warming up properly before partaking in a sport, as well as during any breaks, keeps your muscles flexible, your joints mobile and helps you move and react more easily. Stretching can also help relieve tension and strain.

Most sports or activities have private, local, provincial or federal websites, which can serve as a wealth of resources on safety and physical tips specific to their participants. Website also offers seasonal and activity specific information as well as general health information that can be of value to those taking up a new activity or for those looking to strengthen their preparation.

People participate in sports and physical activities for different reasons: social contact, friendship, fitness, personal achievement or just for the pure joy of the sport. Whatever your personal motivation is, an injury can limit, or end your ability to participate in your chosen pastime, but, depending on its severity can also impact your ability to take part in other aspects of your life, including work and other important events.

Play it safe, and pay attention to what your body is telling you. Don't hesitate to seek medical consultation if pain from an injury increases or does not go away during rest. And no matter what physical activity you are doing, remember to play within the physical confines of your age and conditioning.

Sources: U.S. National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health