

Overuse injuries in young athletes

Dr. James Andrews, a well known orthopedic surgeon, recently commented on overuse injuries in young athletes. He estimates that 60% of the athletes he operates on are high school age or younger. He states "I don't think epidemic is too strong a word. We're seeing kids hurt before they even have a chance to become athletes."

In April the surgeon and the American Orthopedic Society for Sports Medicine launched a program to decrease sports injuries in children. It is called STOP (Sports Trauma and Overuse Prevention). In addition to Dr. Andrews, STOP's spokespeople include Tom Brady, Bo Jackson, Shaquille O'Neal, and Terry Bradshaw.

The warning that Dr. Andrews focuses on is overuse injuries. A generation ago these such injuries were rare in sports, injuries such as stress fractures in runners, torn ligaments in soccer players, and shoulder injuries in baseball players and tennis players. The main culprit is sport specialization. Dr. Andrews states "You just have this enormous pressure nowadays on kids to play that one sport year-round".

In a recent study by the American Sports Medicine Institute, it was found that youth pitchers are at higher risk of injuring their arms if they pitch year-round. In fact, the players that pitched more than 8 months per year were 5x more likely to incur an injury that resulted in surgery.

Some recommendations to limit overuse injuries are:

- Encourage your child to be involved in more than one sport. Cross training helps develop their bodies.
- Don't allow your child to play in more than one league in the same sport in the same season.
- Parents should let children seek their own positions. Everybody cannot be a pitcher.
- For pitchers, make sure the child learns only two pitches to begin with, a fastball and changeup.

STOP has a website www.stopsportsinjuries.org with safety tips for 12 sports.

Three years ago, partly due to Dr. Andrews (who is on the board of Little League Baseball), Little League changed its pitching rules to limit a child to 85 pitches per game. Under old rules, there was a maximum of 6 innings per week but no limit on number of pitches.