

Back Injuries

EXPERT ADVICE

Back Pain

“Outside of a short-term muscle strain, the two most common issues causing back pain in the adolescent athlete are spondylolysis and spondylolisthesis. If the pain isn’t responding to rest and ice and it has been going on for two months or more, it may be indicative of a bigger issue. These conditions often result from sports involving hyperextension or arching of the back – they are commonly found in football linemen, gymnasts, ballerinas, and cheerleaders. If an athlete’s back pain doesn’t resolve with time, rest, and ice, the next course of action is to see a doctor or physical therapist.”



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For athletes, the risk of back injury can be high, and causes vary widely. The back is made up of joints, ligaments, tendons, bones, muscles, and disks, all of which can be injured, leading to lower back injuries. Four of the most common back injuries and conditions that affect athletes are back strain, spondylolysis, spondylolisthesis, and herniated disk.

Back Strain refers to tears in a muscle or tendon in the back. The muscles and tendons that support the spine can be twisted, pulled, or torn and can cause pain, cramping, and decreased function of the joint. *Symptoms: pain that worsens with movement, muscle cramps or spasms, decreased function and/or range of motion of the joint*

Spondylolysis is a stress fracture of the vertebra that most commonly occurs in the lower lumbar area. If a fracture weakens the bone so much that it is unable to maintain its position, the vertebra can shift. Many people with spondylolysis have no symptoms and don’t even know they have the condition. *Symptoms: (if present at all) lower back pain/feeling of a muscle strain, pain that worsens with exercise or activity*

Spondylolisthesis is a condition in which a bone (vertebra) in the spine slips out of its place onto a bone below it. It can be mild or severe and can even exhibit no symptoms. *Symptoms: (if present at all) leg and/or lower back pain that ranges from mild to severe, a feeling of vague weakness in legs associated with prolonged standing or walking, tingling/numbness in the lower extremities*

A Herniated or Slipped Disc occurs when a disc bulges or ruptures from its proper place. It occurs most often in the lower back and can press on nearby nerves causing severe pain. Repeated overuse can lead to slipped discs. *Symptoms: pain that shoots into arm or leg with movement, numbness or tingling in the body part served by the affected nerve, weakness in muscles served by the affected nerve*

Severe injuries such as **Cervical Spinal Cord Injuries** require urgent care by health professionals. *Emergency Symptoms: paralysis or weakness in both arms and legs (quadriplegia), loss of physical sensation, loss of bowel and bladder control* +



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