

Don't fall for the season's sports injuries

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High schools, colleges and even youth sports athletes have already begun practicing and playing in the fall's most popular sports, such as football, volleyball, cheerleading and cross country. With these sports, and any physical activity, medical professionals advise athletes to wear proper equipment, train properly and adhere to appropriate stretching and warmup routines to maximize endurance and minimize sports injuries on the field.

Katherine L. Dec, M.D., a physician in Virginia Commonwealth University Medical Center's Sports Medicine Clinic, offers some essential tips on how athletes can avoid injury during the fall [sports](#) season, and what to do if injury occurs. Dec is a professor in the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation and in the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery in the School of Medicine.

Fall is typically the season for which sports?

Fall is typically the season that hosts men and women's volleyball, men and women's cross country, football, women's field hockey, sideline and competition cheering and golf.

What are the most common sports-related injuries for fall sports?

Joint, muscle and other soft tissue injuries can occur from ankle sprains to anterior cruciate or other knee ligament injuries. In the

aforementioned sports, shoulder pain can occur. Most hear about concussions this time of year as sports concussions have significant awareness in football season; however, they can occur in all of the above mentioned sports. In our acute through long-term concussion programming at VCU Medical Center, optimization of recovery after acute sports concussion is our sports medicine and [brain injury](#) team's goal.

What causes these injuries?

Deconditioning or not being acclimated to the heat and training effects on one's body. During the month of August, many of the teams in area high schools and colleges are in preseason conditioning. Heat illness can be a component of practices and competition as heat index can be high in August. For sprains and strains, it can be deconditioning in sports-specific movement mechanics; strength imbalances, or learning new skills without the foundation of flexibility and strength. Contact/collision sports add an additional factor of potential impact that is unpredictable.

What can athletes do to minimize their chances of injury?

Proper training, proper strength, proper performance of new skills and fundamental understanding of the "field of play" – for example, knowing what the play is and where teammates or opponents are on the field is important. Also, athletes should be mindful of hydration, and training, balanced flexibility, proper sleep and proper nutrition to sustain the effort through a practice or game. Proper fitting, and, the correct equipment is also important for athletes. However, wearing helmets or braces does not eliminate risks of injury.

What part (if any) does staying active throughout the summer play in

preventing injury during the fall sports season?

Staying active in summer months assists in the acclimation of the body to physical effort, the metabolic impact of training, and acclimation to the heat. Preseason activities will assist in this, but staying active in a variety of activities could be considered. Swimming or camps and training programs are examples.

What are the immediate steps to take once injury has occurred?

In general, acute injuries should receive ice. Concussions in sports have their own assessment protocol, and evaluation of related neck injury is important. Significant injuries with numbness, loss of pulse and deformity should seek emergency evaluation if a sports medicine professional such as a physician or certified athletic trainer is not available to assess on site. Nationally the goal is to have an emergency action plan in place at all high schools that accounts for communication and care of the athlete.

What is the role of an institution's/program's athletic trainer?

A certified athletic trainer is a key member of the sports medicine team at high schools, colleges and on professional teams. They directly interact with athletes and coaches and the physicians and parents to optimize safety and care for athletes in their program. They work with the physician in management and assessment of injuries. They are recognized as an appropriate health care professional for sports concussion issues, along with the physician. They additionally educate parents and coaches in injury management and work with the school nurse and administration for sports-related injury protocols. They have

the skill set of sideline management for the multiple injuries that occur in sports. Many athletic trainers fulfill the rehabilitation and treatment of injury at their school programs as a member of the sports medicine team with the physician, parent and coach.

How should athletes utilize this professional?

If the program has an athletic trainer, whether that person is at the athlete's practice or covering another field, it is important to seek them when an injury occurs. Even minor injuries can benefit from some recommendations for home management while the athlete is off the field. The athletic trainer can also be a resource for hydration, nutrition issues or to receive referral options for physician assessment if injury is severe. I recommend the athlete seek their ATC after any injury, even if outside of practice, so an appropriate return to practice or practice modification can be considered with the coach to avoid further injury.

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