

*MLS medical coordinator John Gallucci Jr. is the author of "Soccer Injury Prevention and Treatment: A Guide to Optimal Performance for Players, Parents, and Coaches" to be published this June. In a guest column for Bleacher Report, he outlines how players of all abilities can help avoid the most common injuries.*

Statistics tell us that over 600,000 people a year are hurt while playing soccer in the United States. Yet, if we start to use some common sense, some of these injuries can be prevented.

Soccer is growing each and every day throughout the nation and still, we make the same training mistakes. The following are some simple concepts to decrease the most common injuries incurred while playing soccer—which include strains, sprains, contusions, overuse injuries and hydration issues.

To start, a couple of easy concepts of prevention that are also detailed in my book, "Soccer Injury Prevention and Treatment," include keeping physically fit and to make sure you are in good physical condition at the beginning of the soccer season.

Throughout the year you should try and keep yourself on a comprehensive strength and aerobic workout program to maintain fitness as it is important both in and out of season. This will help to decrease the occurrence of injuries such as strains and sprains.

Besides strength and aerobic fitness, your body needs to be warmed up before playing, whether it be practice or a 90-minute game. I always recommend a good warm up to get the body sweating—usually about 10 minutes of a combined jog, jumping jacks, jump rope etc. will suffice.

Now it's time to do a dynamic stretch by going through some soccer-specific movements such as high knees, back pedals, carioca, butt kicks and side shuffle. After this routine your body will be warmed up and ready to play. A proper warm-up and stretching routine are key to preventing soft-tissue injuries because if the muscle is cold and you do something explosive, you can end up tearing it.

And, the biggest common sense concept of all is...hydrate, hydrate, hydrate! Our body is made up of over 60 per cent water and our blood consists of 90 per cent water. Common sense would be that we need WATER. Our joints need lubrication. Our organs need hydration to work effectively and our muscles need good, hydrated blood to stop cramping and spasms.

We have found that mild levels of dehydration can hurt athletic performance. If you have not had enough fluids, your body will not be able to effectively cool itself through sweat and evaporation. A general recommendation is to drink 24-32 ounces of non-caffeinated fluid two to three hours before exercise.

Drinking an additional six to eight ounces of water or sports drink right before exercise is also helpful. While you are exercising, be sure to break every 20 minutes and consume a six to eight oz. cup of water.

Overuse injuries are the most frustrating thing to me as a medical professional. Proper practice and training schedules can decrease overuse injuries. On many occasions, I have athletes coming in the office because of either overtraining or ramping up their workout by doing too much too quick.

Let's make sure that we have a graduated, progressive training schedule. This way, the body can heal and recover from the workouts. The more you overtask the muscle, the higher the possibility of injuries such as tendonitis, bursitis and stress fractures.

Some other tips for parents recommended by the [American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons](#) are to let your children play other sports with breaks in between seasons. The breaks assist in body recovery and the multitude of other sports assists in conditioning the whole body, decreasing the potential of overuse injuries due to repetition.

When you take a look at the lower extremity, knee injuries are at the top of the list for a soccer player's most feared injury. The one concept that I always preach to my patients is strengthening, so that the muscles and joints surrounding the knee have a strong foundation, helping to decrease the incidence of injuries such as ACL/MCL/LCL/PCL tears and sprains.

Outlined in my book, the Lower Extremity Strengthening System (LESS) was specifically designed to strengthen the lower body to provide a better base of support to improve the foundational biomechanical components for an athlete's ability to squat, jump and land properly.

As parents and coaches, it is important that our soccer players maintain a thorough aerobic, strengthening and flexibility regimen to help decrease some of the most common injuries found in the soccer athlete. By following my above suggestions, the incidence of injuries such as strains, sprains, contusions, overuse injuries and hydration issues will be decreased significantly.