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How to prevent baseball injuries

Lori Johnston

Kids who get an injury playing baseball could be out for months.

Physicians say that although baseball generally is a safe sport, getting hurt in a Little League or a recreational baseball or softball game could require a trip to the emergency room, multiple doctor's visits, surgery and weeks of physical therapy.

Even for parents with insurance, the [cost of medical treatment](#) can be a major hit to a family's budget.



About 6 million children age 5 to 14 play in organized baseball leagues annually, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

118,386 children under 15 were treated in U.S. emergency rooms for baseball- and softball-related injuries in 2010, according to data from the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS) of the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Baseball injuries among kids range from bruises and sprains to fractures and concussions. The most common injuries are facial injuries (33.5 percent), then shoulder, arm and hand injuries (32.4 percent), according to a study published in the journal *Pediatrics*.

Researchers with the University of Rochester School of Medicine & Dentistry in New York found that direct contact with the ball is the most common form of injury. Some can be fatal, such as the rare cases when the ball strikes a child in the chest. For children in positions such as pitcher, who are constantly throwing and even playing on teams in multiple leagues, physicians often see overuse injuries to the shoulder and elbow.

What baseball injuries do children suffer from?

The American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine (AOSSM) says thousands of children are seen every year for elbow and shoulder pain, which are the most common baseball-related injuries. Often, players have torn or damaged the arm's ulnar collateral ligament (UCL), which can result from playing too much, throwing too hard and not getting enough rest.

“Baseball is up there as one of the biggest culprits (for youth injuries),” says Dr. William Levine of Columbia University, and chairman of the advisory board for the STOP (Sports Trauma and Overview Prevention) Sports Injuries campaign. “The most common thing we see are shoulder and elbow injuries in younger and younger children than we’ve ever seen in past decades.”

Talented players face pressure to play. Coaches for multiple teams want to win and the chances of playing professionally or getting a college scholarship are enticing to kids and their parents.

Tips to prevent baseball injuries

The AOSSM recommends pitchers adhere to rules set by the Little League Baseball and Softball that limits the number of pitches allowed per game, depending on the player's age. Pitch limits range from 50 pitches

per game for ages 7 to 8 to 105 pitches per game for ages 17 to 18. The AOSSM also recommends that pitchers should:

- Avoid pitching for more than one team.
- Rotate positions
- Tell someone if they feel pain in their arm.

“Coaches, [parents and the kids] don’t understand that these are preventable injuries,” Levine says.

How much do baseball injuries cost?

Baseball is one of the leading causes of the nearly 40,000 eye injuries that occur annually from sports and recreational activities, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

Children are vulnerable to eye injuries because their depth perception isn’t as strong as adults, and they can’t react as quickly to avoid injury, says Dr. Jerold Stirling, pediatric sports medicine specialist at Loyola University Health System.

Baseball-related eye injuries include fractures to bones around the eye, bleeding within the eye and abrasions to the cornea, Stirling says. These injuries can be caused by an off-target pitch.

Typically, the treatment for these injuries would be covered by insurance, Stirling says.

Co-pays typically are required for doctor’s visits, X-rays and physical therapy. Also, shoulder and elbow injuries can require a recovery period of several months, Levine says.

An insured family’s co-pay could be at least \$10 for each physical therapy appointment. Also, some insurance policies may limit the number of physical therapy visits annually, says Tim McLane, senior athletic trainer at Georgia Regents Sports Medicine Center.

Increased use of plastic face shields on player’s helmets and chest and neck protectors for catchers help prevent injuries, McLane says.

Some financial assistance could be available for Little League players, if your local league has an accidental medical insurance policy. The policy provides excess coverage, beyond what a family’s insurance pays for medical care.

Parents don’t have to pay for the policy, but would have to pay a \$50 deductible if using the additional coverage, says Dan Kirby, Little League’s vice president of risk management. The policy covers up to \$100,000 per person, up to one year from the accident.

One player’s injury

Sterling and Myssi Brown’s 9-year-old son, Levi, slid into second base during his baseball team’s championship game in fall 2012, and complained afterward about his ankle hurting. The parents, who live in Atlanta, didn’t realize Levi’s injury was severe until a couple of hours later, when X-rays showed he had broken the tibia and fibula in his left leg.

After being in a cast for five weeks and a walking boot for three weeks, Levi needed physical therapy. His

one-hour sessions were twice a week for four weeks. He was playing baseball again in spring 2013.

The Browns were thankful for their employer-sponsored [health insurance](#), which covered a portion of the bills for the doctor's visits, cast and physical therapy. The family had to meet their annual \$500 deductible for 2012 and 2013, as the treatment and physical therapy stretched into the new year. Co-pays also were required for doctor's visits and physical therapy.

The out-of-pocket costs totaled about \$1,700, Myssi estimates.

“When you see your child’s leg broken all the way through, you want the best care at whatever cost, from the first X-ray, all the way through rehab,” Myssi says. “It made us thankful for the medical system and for insurance. But there are a lot of costs that ... you end up finding out about later.”

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