Too Much, Too Fast: The Truth About Overuse Injuries

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With young athletes transitioning from sports season to sports season with little time for rest, it is not surprising that more and more of them are developing overuse injuries.

What Is An Overuse Injury?
An overuse injury is any type of injury to a muscle, bone, ligament, tendon or joint that occurs over time as a result of repetitive trauma. While overuse injuries are more common than traumatic or acute injuries, they are often harder to diagnose due to the gradual onset of symptoms. Initially, the most common symptom is soreness that begins during activity. If the injury is left untreated, the pain becomes more severe and even chronic resulting in a loss of performance until the injury can heal.

Who Gets Overuse Injuries?
Any athlete can potentially suffer from an overuse injury. Overhead throwing athletes are often at the greatest risk for developing overuse injuries to the shoulder and elbow. Rotor cuff tendinitis and subacromial bursitis, often referred to as “Shoulder Impingement Syndrome” are common conditions affecting the complex joint of the shoulder. Medial epicondylitis, known as “Little League Elbow,” and biceps tendinitis are more common injuries associated with the elbow. It is important to remember that overuse injuries to the shoulder are not limited to throwing athletes but can affect any athlete who engages in repetitive use of the arm while over the head.

Overuse injuries to the lower extremities i.e. the hips, knees, lower legs, ankles and feet occur most often in runners, but can affect any athlete.

The most common overuse injuries of the lower extremities are:
- Hip - Bursitis, Snapping Hip, Iliotibial Band Syndrome, and Stress Fractures
- Knees - Patellar Tendinitis (Jumper’s Knee), Patellofemoral Lower Legs - Stress Fractures, Anterior-medial Compartment Syndrome (Shin Splints)
- Ankles - Achilles Tendinopathy
- Feet - Plantar Fasciitis, Over-pronation and Stress Fractures

What are the Causes of Overuse Injuries?
The human body has a great ability to adapt to the demands placed on it. Through exercise, muscles, tendons, ligaments and bones become stronger and more functional. However, when body tissues are presented with too much stress, too little recovery time, or both, the result is just the opposite. The body’s ability to recover is overwhelmed. Instead of a stronger body, we get a weaker, injured one.

The factors that lead to overuse injuries are commonly described as intrinsic (internal to the individual) or extrinsic (external to the individual). Intrinsic factors are biomechanical abnormalities unique to a particular athlete and include such features as malalignments, muscle imbalance, inflexibility, weakness, and instability. Extrinsic factors include improper training equipment and surfaces, improper technique, poor footwear, and training errors.

How Are Overuse Injuries Treated?
Complete treatment depends on the specific diagnosis. However, the treatments typically associated with any overuse injury include relative rest, immobilization, ice, anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDS), and physical therapy or therapeutic exercises.

What Can I Do To Prevent Overuse Injuries?
Address The Issue - It is not enough to just take medications that mask the pain and play through it. Consult a certified athletic trainer, physical therapist or orthopedic physician as early as possible. The sooner you begin treatment, the quicker recovery will be.

 Pace Yourself - Be sure not to increase more than one training variable, intensity, duration and frequency, at one time. Follow the rule of 10: Don’t increase any of these variables by more than 10% in one week.

 Recovery - Have adequate recovery time built into your training program.

 Know Your Body - Monitor your weight, sleep, and heart rate throughout your training program. If rapid changes, increases or decreases occur, back off your training.

 Proper Technique - It is critical to perform each activity with proper technique in order to ensure you are not creating muscle imbalances that will affect your joint mechanics and negatively alter your performance.

 Mix It Up - Include off days, light days, flexibility and cross training into your routine.

“The basic misperception with most athletes, young and old, is not realizing that the body needs time to heal,” says Beau Sasser Jr., M.D., a Health System orthopaedic surgeon and medical director of the Health System’s Sports Medicine Program. “Instead of constantly focusing on one part of the body, it is better to change up workouts and institute core strengthening and good cardio. Utilizing this approach will keep an athlete in top condition while decreasing the incidence of overuse injuries.”

Meet Dr. Beau Sasser
Beau Sasser, M.D., is a native of Glynn County and a graduate of Glynn Academy. He received his undergraduate degree from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, and his medical doctorate degree from the Medical College of Georgia, where he also completed both his internship and orthopaedic residency.

Following his residency, Dr. Sasser received exclusive sports medicine training while in a fellowship program with the Kansas City Orthopaedic institute. During his time there, he worked with the NFL’s Kansas City Chiefs, treating a variety of sports and orthopaedic injuries incurred by these elite athletes.

Dr. Sasser returned to Glynn County in 2005 and joined Summit Sports Medicine & Orthopaedic Surgery, where he specializes in sports medicine. Dr. Sasser is board-certified with the American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery.

Summit Sports Medicine & Orthopaedic Surgery is a strategic affiliate of Southeast Georgia Health System and has three convenient locations. For more information, call 912-262-9961 in Brunswick, 912-466-5570 on St. Simons Island or 912-576-6355 in St. Marys.