

## What Are the Top 5 Fall Sports with the Highest Injury Rate?

The air is crisp, the leaves are falling, and the days keep getting shorter and shorter. If you are among the millions of sports fans in the United States, autumn weather can mean only one thing—football season! Of course, in addition to football, fall also marks a return to school and the start of team soccer, cross country, gymnastics, and cheerleading, among others. You may look forward to the return of these competitions but, like any activity, it is important to play safely. The top five fall sports with the highest likelihood for injury are:

1. Football
2. Cheerleading
3. Gymnastics
4. Cross Country
5. Soccer

### General Guidelines to Avoid Injury

No matter what your sport is, it is important to take a few minutes to make sure that you know how to be safe. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) many sports-related injuries can be prevented. The CDC suggest adhering to these guidelines:

- Have a physical exam before starting new sports activities. Adults who have certain chronic diseases and those at risk for chronic conditions, including men over age 40 and women over age 50, should consult with a physician before undertaking a new exercise activity.
- If starting a new sports program, set realistic goals and start with frequencies and intensities appropriate to your current physical condition, based on consultation with your physician, and injury history.
- Do not wait until the last minute. To get into proper shape, start strength training the muscles you will need a month or so ahead of time. In addition, stretch and warm up with light exercise for 5 minutes before you play any sport.
- Make sure you are properly outfitted for each sport, including proper protective gear like a helmet, shin guards, and knee pads; shoes that fit well and are appropriate for the sport; and, clothing that is not loose so that it will not become tangled. In some sports, mouth guards and eye and face protection can help prevent traumas to the face, head, eyes, and mouth, which are among the most common types of injuries.
- Ensure that playing fields and environments are safe and well maintained, including being free of tripping hazards, holes, exposed sprinklers, and broken glass.
- Do not continue to play when in pain. If you get injured, see your doctor. Follow all of the doctor's orders for recovery, and get the doctor's OK before returning to play. Playing again too soon can lead to more serious and longer-lasting injuries.
- Have a first aid kit available at all times.
- Participate in sports that are supervised by an experienced or trained coach who understands and enforces game rules.
- Learn skills to prevent injuries specific to your sport, like learning how to safely stop or fall while playing soccer.
- For children's team sports, be sure to match and group children based on skill level, weight, and physical maturity – especially for contact sports.

## **Sport Specific Ways to Avoid Injury**

### Football

Football is one of the most popular sports, and also the one that incurs the most injuries. Overuse injuries occur at times, but the majority of the almost 1 million cases seen in emergency rooms each year, most are a result of forceful contact with an object or another player. Knee, ankle, and shoulder injuries are most common in football, including tears to the anterior or posterior cruciate ligament (ACL/PCL) and to the menisci (cartilage of the knee). These injuries can affect a player's long-term ability to play the sport.

To reduce injury, football players should stay in good physical condition even in the offseason, wear proper protective equipment, and never lead a tackle with their helmet.

### Cheerleading

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) reports that cheerleading leads to thousands of emergency room visits every year. Cheerleading injuries affect all areas of the body, but especially the wrists, shoulders, ankles, head, and neck. While cheerleading injuries do not happen as often as in some other sports, the injuries often are more severe. In fact, cheerleading is the cause of more than half of all catastrophic injuries in female athletes.

Mandated stunt restrictions, professional coaching, and proper conditioning are crucial to help prevent cheerleading injuries.

### Gymnastics

Gymnastics is a rigorous sport and overuse and weight-bearing injuries are common, including:

- Elbow Dislocation
- Wrist Sprains
- Shoulder Injury
- Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL) Knee Injury
- Achilles Tendon Injury
- Lower Back Injuries

Lower extremity injuries usually result from the landing and dismount activities. To avoid injury:

- Wear safety gear like wrist guards, hand grips, footwear, ankle or elbow braces, and pads.
- Do not “play through the pain” — if you are hurt, see your doctor and fully follow instructions for treatment and recovery.
- Inspect equipment to ensure that it is in good condition, including padded floors, secured mats under every apparatus, and safety harnesses for learning difficult moves.
- Insist on spotters when learning new skills.
- Warm up muscles before beginning a training workout or competition.

### Cross Country

Long distance running is a great sport, but overuse injuries can lead to injury. Cross country injuries are common in the following:

- Knees — kneecap pain and tendonitis.
- Lower leg — shin splints, stress fractures, calf problems.
- Feet and ankles — ankle sprain, heel pain, plantar fasciitis (bottom of foot pain), toe injuries.
- Pelvis and hips — muscle pulls, growth plate stress injuries, tendonitis, and groin or buttock pain.

Tips to avoid injury include:

- Stretch for five minutes before beginning.
- Speed up slowly.
- Wear proper attire:
  - Properly fitting socks help avoid blisters and irritation.
  - Shoes with good arch support. Orthotic shoe inserts (either pre-manufactured or custom-made) are beneficial for people with flat feet, high-arched feet, or unstable ankles.
- Do not run through pain. See a doctor at the first sign of injury.

### Soccer

Soccer injuries can be either from forceful physical contact or from overuse. When a player receives a direct impact, fractures and severe bruising may happen.

Common soccer injuries to the lower extremities are:

- Sprains and strains.
- Cartilage tears in the knee (anterior cruciate ligament—ACL).
- Shin splints (soreness in the calf).
- Patellar tendinitis (pain in the knee).
- Achilles tendinitis (pain in the back of the ankle).
- Groin pulls.

Stress fractures occur when the bone becomes weak from overuse. If pain does not improve after a few days of rest, consult your healthcare provider to ensure that a stress fracture is not present.

Common soccer injuries to the upper extremities are:

- Wrist sprains or fractures.
- Dislocated shoulders.
- Concussions.

To avoid soccer injuries:

- Always wear cleats and shin guards. Some studies show that multi-studded cleats are safer than screw-in cleats.
- Be aware of poor field conditions.
- Use synthetic balls — leather balls can become waterlogged and heavy, which can result in head or neck injury when heading the ball.
- Stay physically fit in the off-season.

### **Who is Most at Risk?**

Twice as many males as females have sports-related injuries. Collision or contact sports have the highest rate of injury, especially football, basketball, baseball, and soccer. These sports account for about 80% of all sports-related emergency room visits for children between 5 and 14 years old. Teens and young adults are more likely to be injured because of excessive force or intensity of play. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) reports that the most common sports-related injuries are:

- Sprains and strains
- Knee injuries
- Swollen muscles
- Achilles tendon injuries
- Pain along the shin bone
- Rotator cuff injuries
- Fractures
- Dislocations

In addition to children and young adults, grownups who are out of practice or who overestimate their ability, are more prone to sports-related injuries. It is important to ease into a sport that has not been played in a while and to take the time to prepare for it. Whether trying out for the high school soccer team or playing a game of pickup football with your neighbors, following these suggestions will help keep you safe and injury-free.

Sources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

ESPN: [www.espn.com](http://www.espn.com)

National Institutes of Health (NIH): [www.medlineplus.gov](http://www.medlineplus.gov)

STOP Sports Injuries (Sports Trauma and Overuse Prevention), an initiative of the American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine (AOSSM): [www.stopsportsinjuries.org](http://www.stopsportsinjuries.org)