
Focus on Safety

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As involvement in football, both organized and recreational, continues to grow, knowing the benefits and safety issues that surround the sport of football is very important.

According to the [Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association \(SGMA\)](#), in 2002, 18.7 million boys, girls, and adults participated in touch and tackle football. This number reflects the ever-increasing popularity of playing football, most likely a result of the benefits it provides. Numerous studies show that participating in sports improves an individual's fitness, coordination, self-discipline, sense of accomplishment, teamwork, and overall wellbeing.

The wellbeing of players is at the forefront of youth football programs across America. An April 2002 [Mayo Clinic study](#) showed that "the risk of injury in youth football does not appear greater than other recreational or competitive sports. . . youth football injuries are uncommon."

Yet, with any physical activity, there is the risk of injury. In fact, more children are hurt riding bikes than playing contact sports such as football. Due to the inevitable risk of injury, it is important for both coaches and parents to be aware of current health and safety issues.

"Many adults volunteer to coach not realizing they are also volunteering to handle any injuries that might occur," said Marshall Steele, orthopedic surgeon and author of [Sideline Help](#). "A basic knowledge of what could be life or limb threatening, as well as how to evaluate who can and cannot return to play is essential."

Steele also notes that prevention is a key factor. "Heat stroke and heat exhaustion are preventable," said Steele. "Heat emergencies usually occur under conditions of extreme heat and humidity, so overweight, unconditioned, or overdressed players are at high risk, especially during preseason training. Coaches must allow players frequent water breaks."

Football promotes the wellbeing of players through its finely detailed safety practices, rules, and regulations. Evidence of the direct results of football's strict guidelines is displayed in an analysis of athletic injuries conducted by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, which revealed that 5-15 year olds playing organized football had 12 percent fewer injuries per capita than 5-15 year olds playing soccer.

[Pop Warner](#), a premier youth football organization, sets high safety standards for players and coaches. "We group players according to their age and weight, in order to avoid mismatches," said Jon Butler, executive director. "Different divisions are designed so that the weight difference and age difference are no greater than 35 pounds and 3 years respectively."

Another important safety precaution is proper equipment. Ensuring that all players have high quality helmets, padding, and other gear when on the playing field is a top priority that will greatly minimize the risk of injury.

Over the years, youth football leagues have adjusted the rules of the game to prevent injuries. The fact that most injuries are easily predictable, and thus preventable, should make the issue of injury non-problematic. However, the most significant problems involving injury arise when players do not notify coaches or adults that they have been injured. Re-injury is also a common problem when both players and coaches do not allow proper time

for injuries to heal. These problems are easily avoidable through instructing players to report injuries and afterwards insisting on the resolution of injuries before a return to participation.

As the sport of football continues to grow, the goal is not to be satisfied that youth football is no riskier than other sports, rather it is to continue to make it safer. Once this has been accomplished, the sport of football can share its success with other competitive sports.

The evaluation of any athlete, whether as a part of health evaluations prior to activity or as a diagnosis of an injury as the consequence of sports activities, is specific to that individual and the history and current state of the individual presented. Advice, diagnosis and treatment is individualized according to numerous factors, including patient health and age information, medical history and symptoms. All athletes should be cleared by a physician or other appropriate medical professional before engaging in physical activities and, after injury, diagnosis and treatment, for return to play.