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## How Safe Is Soccer for Children?



**A** great sport for building endurance, dexterity, speed, agility, coordination and teamwork, soccer is a game played by both boys and girls. As far as safety is concerned, the injury rate in soccer is estimated to be between one-fifth and one-half that of football, America's other favorite fall sport. Still, with more than three million kids playing youth soccer, injuries send about 120,000 children to the emergency room each year. Many of their

injuries could have been prevented through good conditioning, proper use of protective equipment and common sense.

**Sprains and strains, especially those of the ankle and lower leg, are the most frequent soccer injuries.** They are much more likely to happen at the beginning of the season to players who are out of shape. Girls are especially prone to noncontact knee injuries, such as a torn anterior cruciate ligament.

We can help your child avoid such injuries through a conditioning program to strengthen the quadriceps muscles that run down the front of the thigh and the hamstring muscles at the back of the thigh. Strengthening these muscles helps stabilize the knee so it can better withstand quick stops and sharp turns. We also can suggest stretching exercises to improve flexibility and reduce the risk of muscle strains.

**Another safety concern involves "heading" the ball,** which can cause a concussion and result in brain damage. Because youth brains are still developing and are susceptible to serious consequences from head injuries, experts recommend that this technique not be taught to children younger than 10 years of age. For older children playing at a more advanced level, we can recommend exercises to strengthen the neck muscles and avoid injury when performing this move.

**Prevention is the best defense against soccer-related injuries.** We can develop a program of conditioning and strengthening exercises that, along with the right protective equipment and a coach who uses age-appropriate training techniques, will give you every reason to expect a safe and successful soccer season.