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# Florida Podiatric Medical Association

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## **Sports and Children's Feet**

**TALLAHASSEE** – Now that fall is here and kids are back in school, participation in sports, such as youth football and soccer, is quite popular. Various sports require miles of running – with quick stops and starts – and this type of activity can lead to foot and ankle injuries. Injuries are often a result of participating in sports activities and the lower extremities are particularly susceptible. Podiatric physicians are specialists in the care of the lower extremity and can assist young athletes both before and after sports injuries arise.

The repeated stress of practice can bring on chronic or “overuse” injuries. These injuries can nag at a player and hamper, if not end, a season of competition. This is why student athletes should see a podiatric physician specializing in sports medicine prior to taking the practice field. A podiatric physician can identify biomechanical abnormalities (those caused by the forces of the muscles and gravity on the lower extremity) that can potentially increase the chance of injury. For example, if an athlete has flat feet, extensive running could produce chronically strained ankles. A podiatric physician can recommend specific exercises to strengthen and improve the flexibility of the foot and ankle, and/or recommend taping or padding the foot or ankle before practice and competition. He or she may also prescribe orthoses, which are customized shoe inserts that correct biomechanical problems by redistributing the body's weight.

The foot and ankle bear the brunt of the crashes, bumps, and bruises of sports. Feet get stepped on, kicked, jammed, twisted, and cut. Quick changes in direction and hard tackling can lead to sprains and fractures of the ankle. Impact or trauma injuries are more serious than overuse injuries and require time away from practice and the game field. Immediate treatment should include the “RICE” formula: Rest, Ice, Compression, and Elevation. Trauma injuries should always be treated by a medical professional, such as a podiatric physician, and be fully healed before the player returns to the field.

Podiatric physicians agree it's often better to buy a child two \$50 pairs of shoes than a single \$100 pair, so the shoes can be rotated to avoid rapid wear deterioration. Cleats are the footwear of choice for all contact sports down to the youth leagues. Cleats should be light, flexible, and

always fit properly. Uppers should be supple and there should be at least a finger's width separating the tip of the big toe and the end of the shoe. Laces should be tight. Athletes should wear the same style of socks they will be wearing during practice and games when shopping for shoes. Shopping in the afternoon, when the feet are naturally slightly swollen, is recommended as well. If athletes will be playing on artificial turf, cross-training shoes or sneakers are the footwear of choice.

Trainers and physicians frequently tape the feet and ankles of their players for added stability, especially on artificial turf. This can help prevent injuries from occurring and keep a minor injury from becoming a major one.

The following are the most common injuries suffered as a result of sports activities:

Ankle Sprains: Immediate treatment using the RICE formula to reduce swelling is important to quick healing. Any sprain that doesn't show improvement in three days should be checked by a podiatric physician.

Fractures: Fractures are more serious injuries that require immediate medical attention. Casting, and sometimes surgery, is required to immobilize fractures and set breaks. Unfortunately, this type of injury requires 10 - 12 weeks of recovery and rehabilitation, which usually ends a season of competition for the athlete.

Stress Fractures: Stress fractures are incomplete cracks in bone that can be caused by overuse. These types of fractures heal with complete rest. Extra padding in shoes helps prevent them.

Turf Toe: Turf toe is a painful jam or hyperextension of the big toe. The condition is more common on artificial turf, but can happen on grass as well. Immediate treatment includes the RICE regimen, and wearing a stiffer shoe prevents aggravation of the injury. Splinting the toe or special orthoses can also help.

Here are some tips for parents to help their children avoid sports injuries:

- 1) If your child is complaining about their feet and/or ankles hurting, don't let them play. Make an appointment with a podiatric physician to see if there are injuries you may not be aware of.
- 2) Don't let children use running shoes for contact or court sports. They should always wear sport-specific shoes (shoes designed for the exact sport your child will be participating in).
- 3) Let your child know that warming up properly is important prior to hitting the field.
- 4) Encourage your child to stay in condition during the off season as well.
- 5) Change your children's shoes often and check the sizing and wear on a regular basis. Children's feet are constantly growing.

Helping your children to be more aware of potential foot and ankle problems will ensure that they have a happy, healthy playing season.

For more information, contact the FPMA at (850) 224-4085.

*The FPMA is a Tallahassee-based, statewide, professional association representing podiatric physicians in Florida. Founded in 1927 for the purpose of advancing the science and art of Podiatric Medicine, the FPMA is dedicated to promoting the importance of podiatric healthcare among the general public and healthcare professionals throughout the state of Florida. The FPMA currently has over 950 members and represents 70% of the active, licensed podiatric physicians in Florida.*

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