

Soccer Safety

Soccer is the most popular sport in the world for good reason. It's easy to learn at a young age and a great source of exercise. Plus, it's an exciting, fast-paced game that's lots of fun to play.

But soccer is a contact sport, and injuries are bound to happen. Collisions with other players can cause bruises and even concussions. All the running involved in a soccer game can lead to muscle pulls and strains, and getting hit with a ball or improperly heading one can cause head or neck injuries.

With so many people playing soccer these days, it's only natural that some will end up getting hurt. Fortunately, most soccer injuries are minor, but serious injuries such as broken bones and concussions do happen.

Ankle sprains are the most common soccer injury; other frequent injuries include hamstring pulls or tears, groin pulls, muscle cramps, shin splints, concussions, and pulled or strained calf muscles. In addition, players can get repetitive-stress injuries (RSIs) such as tendonitis or stress fractures from playing too much or playing through pain.

Gear Guidelines

Soccer doesn't require a lot of gear for each player other than shin guards and cleats, but it's a good idea to give some thought to all of these important pieces of equipment before you play:

- ▶ **Soccer cleats.** Choose a pair of shoes with molded cleats or ribbed soles. Shoes with screw-in cleats may carry a higher risk of injury, so only use them when you need extra traction, such as on a wet field or a field with tall grass. Make sure your cleats fit properly and are laced up tightly each time you play.
- ▶ **Shin guards.** If soccer players get lower leg injuries, it's usually because they weren't protected with adequate shin guards. A good shin guard will mold to the shin, end just below the knee, and fit snugly around the ankle bone. Bring your soccer socks and cleats with you when you buy shin guards to be sure that they'll fit properly.
- ▶ **Soccer socks.** These are meant to hold shin guards securely in place and should be worn anytime you practice or play.
- ▶ **Other gear.** Mouthguards are a good way to protect your teeth, lips, cheeks, and tongue, and can help prevent head and neck injuries such as concussions and jaw fractures.

Mouthguards are recommended for all soccer players. Goalies will want to wear long-sleeved shirts and specialized goalie gloves to protect their hands while stopping shots.

Before You Take the Field

Coming into the soccer season in good shape will not only help you be a better player, it will also go a long way toward preventing injuries. Start working out and eating right a few months before the season is set to begin. Better yet, get regular exercise and eat a healthy diet year-round, and then you won't need to worry about being in shape for the season.

Here are some other things to bear in mind before you start play:

Whenever you practice or play, inspect the field to make sure there are no holes or other obstacles, including debris and broken glass. Store extra balls and equipment well off to the sides of the field before you start a game.

Always warm up and stretch before playing. Do some jumping jacks or run in place for a few minutes to get the blood flowing, and then slowly and gently stretch, paying particular attention to your ankles, calves, knees, and hamstrings. Hold each stretch for at least 30 seconds before moving on to the next one.

Inspect the goals at each end of the field to make sure they're safe. Goals should be securely anchored to the ground, and goal posts should be well padded to decrease the risk of injuries to goalies and players who collide with the posts. Never climb on a goal or hang from the crossbar. Injuries and even deaths have occurred from nets falling onto players.

If the field you will be playing on is wet, use synthetic, nonabsorbent balls. Leather balls can become waterlogged and very heavy, increasing the risk of injury.

During Game Play

Know and obey the rules of soccer. Unsafe play is a major cause of injuries and will lead to you getting kicked out of the game. In fact, many leagues will suspend you for additional games if you are a repeat offender.

Keep your head up and be aware of your teammates and opposing players at all times. Collisions are more likely if you go charging blindly down the field and don't pay attention to other players.

Learn and use proper techniques, particularly when it comes to heading the ball. Heading the ball can injure your head and neck if you don't do it properly. If you don't know where other players are, you run the risk of head-to-head collisions if two of you jump to head a ball. And protect your tongue — keep your mouth closed and your tongue away from your teeth while heading a ball.

If you get a cramp or feel pain while playing, ask to come out of the game, and don't start playing again until the pain goes away. Playing through pain might seem like a brave thing to do, but it can increase the severity of an injury and possibly keep you on the sidelines for longer stretches of time.

A Few Other Reminders

Make sure there is first aid available at the fields where you play and practice, as well as someone who knows how to administer it.

Be prepared for emergency situations. Have a responsible adult on hand when you play, or have a plan to contact medical personnel so they can quickly treat concussions, fractures, or dislocations.

Stay hydrated, particularly on hot, sunny days, by drinking plenty of fluids before, during, and after games and practices.

If you have any piercings or jewelry, be sure to remove them before playing.

If an opposing player collides with you or does something you disagree with, don't take it personally. Let the referees handle the situation, and never start a fight with another player.

Keep soccer fun. That's why you started playing in the first place, isn't it? Follow some basic precautions and stay aware of what's going on around you, and you should be able to avoid most injuries. And that'll keep you out on the field where you want to be.