



Contacts: Robin Waxenberg
212-489-8006
robin@robwax.com

Ellen Satlof, NATA
214-637-6282, ext. 159
ellen@nata.org

As Preseason Practices are Underway, the National Athletic Trainers' Association Issues Guidelines for Back to School Sports Safety

DALLAS, July 29, 2011 – With August nearly here and preseason school sports practices underway, college and high school athletes are returning to the field, mat, gym or arena ready to tackle, kick or swing their way into fall sports activities. “As athletes return to the competitive sports roster, they should gradually acclimatize to their activity of choice and to follow sports safety protocols,” says Charlie Thompson, MS, ATC, head athletic trainer at Princeton University and chair of the National Athletic Trainers’ Association College/University Athletic Trainers’ Committee. “With the right preparticipation planning and gradual return to full participation, they will be taking the right steps to prevent injury and enjoy a competitive season.”

More than 421,000 young men and women participate on more than 17,800 NCAA sponsored sports teams¹ and more than seven million high school students play sports today. There are a reported 715,000 high school sports-related injuries experienced each year, and 8,000 children are treated in emergency rooms each day for sports-related injuries.²

Sports Safety Tips to Keep Athletes in the Game

NATA offers important tips for parental consideration before an athlete laces up his or her sneakers and begins formal participation. “It’s vital for parents to work in tandem with coaches, athletic trainers and other members of a school’s medical team to ensure clear and consistent communication,” says Thompson.

- 1. Make sure the athlete is physically and mentally in the game:** Parents, with assistance from coaches and athletic trainers, should determine whether their children are physically and psychologically conditioned for the sport/activity level they’re playing. Do not push children into something they do not want to do. Additionally, if an athlete has been injured and is returning to sport, it’s critical for him or her to have the right mind set and confidence to return to play and avoid repeat injury.

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¹ NCAA Sports Sponsorship and Participation Rates Report for 2008-2009

² Wier, L. (Thomson Reuters), Miller, A. (Student), and Steiner, C. (AHRQ). *Sports Injuries in Children Requiring Hospital Emergency Care, 2006*. HCUP Statistical Brief #75. June 2009.

2. **Get a pre-participation exam:** All athletes should have a pre-participation exam to determine their readiness to play and uncover any condition that may limit participation.
3. **Medical team approach to care:** In the case of injury, find out who will provide care and ask to review their credentials. Many schools and sports teams rely on athletic trainers or parents with medical and first aid training and certification to keep kids safe. Yet less than half of high schools have access to athletic trainers.
4. **Beat the heat:** Acclimatize athletes to warm weather activities over a 14-day period. The goal is to increase exercise heat tolerance and enhance the ability to exercise safely and effectively in warm and hot conditions.
5. **Use your head:** There are between 1.6 million and 3.8 million brain injuries occurring in sports each year and 63,000 occur in high school sports alone, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Be certain the student athlete and medical team are well educated on concussion prevention and management and that the athlete is encouraged to speak up if hit in the head and suffering from any related symptoms including dizziness, loss of memory, light headedness, fatigue, or imbalance to name a few.
6. **Safe Weight Loss and Maintenance:** Unsafe weight management practices can compromise athletic performance and negatively affect an individual's health, says Thompson. Athletes and physically active individuals often attempt to lose weight by not eating, developing poor body image due to the influence of others, or engage in unhealthy weight control behaviors and restricting fluids. "This is especially true in weight restrictive sports like wrestling, or gymnastics or ice skating where lean and fit bodies are aesthetically appealing, he says. "It is critical these athletes they work with an athletic trainer, nutritionist or other qualified health care professional to establish a balanced diet and approach to weight gain or loss in keeping with their level of activity."
7. **Take it to heart:** Many schools today have automated external defibrillators (AEDs) on site during competitions which if used efficiently and effectively can save a life and stave off a catastrophic situation. Ensure that the medical expert and other personnel know where they are located, how to use them and that they are placed on sidelines during competitions and games.
8. **Share an athlete's medical history:** Parents should complete an emergency medical authorization form, providing parent contact information and permission for emergency medical care for the student athlete. Check with your school/league to obtain the form.
9. **Ensure equipment is in working order:** Make sure all equipment ranging from field goals, basketball flooring, gymnastics apparatus and field turf are in safe and working order. This also includes emergency medical equipment such as spine boards, splint devices and AEDs (which should be checked once per month; batteries and pads need consistent monitoring and replacing). All it takes is a slip on a wet surface or twist of an ankle on an ungroomed field to lead to lower extremity injuries, among others.
10. **Ascertain coaches' qualifications:** A background check should always be performed on coaches and volunteers:

- Coaches should have background and knowledge in the sport they are coaching. They should be credentialed if that is a requirement in the state, conference or league. Also, ensure appropriate credentials for coaching from the respective sport governing body.
- All coaches should have cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), AED and first aid training.
- Coaches should strictly enforce the sports rules and have a plan for dealing with emergencies.

11. Check that locker rooms, gyms and shower surfaces are clean: With the advent of MRSA and related bacterial, viral and fungal skin infections reported in recent years, it is critical to keep these surfaces routinely cleaned and checked for germs. Athletes must be discouraged from sharing towels, athletic gear, water bottles, disposable razors and hair clippers. All clothing and equipment should be laundered and/or disinfected on a daily basis.

12. Be smart about sickle cell trait: All newborns are tested for this particular inherited condition and those results should be shared during a pre-participation exam. Red blood cells can sickle during intense exertion, blocking blood vessels and posing a grave risk for athletes with the sickle cell trait. Screening and simple precautions may prevent deaths and help the athlete with sickle cell trait thrive in his or her chosen sport. Be aware of warning signs including fatigue or shortness of breath that may indicate an athlete is in danger.

13. Ask if the school/league has an emergency action plan: Every team should have a written emergency action plan, reviewed by the athletic trainer or local Emergency Medical Service. Individual assignments and emergency equipment and supplies need to be included in the emergency action plan. If an athletic trainer is not employed by the school or sport league, qualified individuals need to be present to render care. Knowing that a school has prepared for emergency will give parents peace of mind.

14. Build in recovery time: Allow time for the body to rest and rejuvenate in between seasons. "If you're an athlete who has just finished the basketball season and has your sights set on baseball, make sure to take time off and recover from the rigors of grueling months on the court," says Thompson. If athletes don't make time for recovery, injury can occur. Acclimatizing to the next sport, with appropriate strength, flexibility and balance training, and the supervision of an athletic trainer, will help ensure a healthy season ahead.

15. Pay attention to sport specific injury prevention: "Basketball is a sport requiring lots of twists, turns and jumping," says Thompson. "These motions put added stress on the anterior cruciate ligament or ACL, one of four ligaments necessary for proper knee stability and function. Sudden movements or rigorous activity can significantly increase the chances of an ACL tear, a common injury among athletes – especially in females. "Increase power, agility and range of motion through stretching exercises that improve flexibility; braces to help control joint movement if necessary; and drills to strengthen the quadriceps, and other leg, hip, pelvic and core muscles."

"It's vital for coaches, teachers, athletic trainers, and others involved in the care of the student athlete to establish clear and open communication and ensure a safe sports environment," adds Thompson. "Only then is it a true win-win for the team, individual athlete and family members and friends cheering on the sidelines."

National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) – Health Care for Life & Sport

Athletic trainers are health care professionals who specialize in the prevention, diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation of injuries and sport-related illnesses. They prevent and treat chronic musculoskeletal injuries from sports, physical and occupational activity, and provide immediate care for acute injuries. Athletic trainers offer a continuum of care that is unparalleled in health care. The National Athletic Trainers' Association represents and supports 34,000 members of the athletic training profession. Visit www.nata.org

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