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Playing It Safe: Principles to Prevent Injuries

With an increasing number of people training for 5Ks and marathons as well as competitive and recreational sports, there's a noticeable rise in strains, sprains and overuse injuries. Many of these injuries can be prevented by going back to the basics: stretching, strengthening and conditioning.

Orthopedic surgeon Scott Slivka MD offers sound advice, drawn from his expertise as a sports medicine expert as well as from his personal experience as a former college athlete and oversight of his son and daughter as they pursue competitive sports such as soccer, baseball, and basketball:



#1. Don't Underestimate the Value of Flexibility

Flexibility helps prevent strained groins, hamstrings and other leg injuries. "Flexibility should be achieved over time and not just right before an event or game," Dr. Slivka recommends. He suggests stretching three to four days a week in a relaxed, unhurried manner.

Flexibility training is best started at least four weeks before a sport begins. Martial arts and yoga are great ways to develop flexibility, he says. If you can't get to a class, there are plenty of DVDs and smartphone apps to help. "Before an event or activity, do a light aerobic warm-up and then stretch for 10 minutes.

#2. Build Muscle Strength

"Everyone can agree that a stronger athlete generally has an advantage," Dr. Slivka says. "Even children who haven't reached puberty safely can perform light-resistance, high-repetition programs."

A schedule of regular conditioning activity is the best formula for success," he continues. "Any activity helps, such as biking, swimming or neighborhood games."

#3. Start Conditioning Long before the Big Event

Most sports involve running, and Dr. Slivka says the earlier athletes start conditioning, the better. Whether it's jogging, swimming, gymnastics, martial arts, yoga or playing in the neighborhood, being active helps prevent injuries. Joints and muscles accustomed to aerobic exercise will fare much better during rigorous sports training.

Mental Preparation: Training beyond Exercise

Whether you are training for your first 5K or just wanting to start an exercise program, there are some basic mental preparation skills that can assist in achieving success.



- **Set Realistic Goals**

Be clear about what your goal is for your training, why you want to achieve it and a plan for how you will reach the goal.

- **Have a Positive Attitude**

If you don't feel confident about what you are doing, it becomes too easy to stop working toward your goal.

- **Be Prepared for Setbacks**

All athletes run into problems in their training and performance such as injuries, life challenges, etc. Creating a game plan about how to manage those setbacks ahead of time can help you manage them better.

- **Be Engaged**

Being focused on how to achieve your goal can be helpful. Using techniques such as visualizing your success (i.e. how you will feel when you achieve that goal), using positive self-talk (channeling your inner coach), and being specific about your training plan so that follow through comes easily (training task, day of the week, time of day, duration), are all ways to increase confidence and commitment to your goal.

Having training or exercise goals can be life changing in many ways. So “dream” it in order to do it!

Nutrition: Fuel for Your Workouts*

When it comes to nutrition, there are certain things you should do before, during and after your workout to maximize your performance.

#1. Before: Fuel-up Two Hours before Exercising

- Hydrate with water.
- Eat healthy carbohydrates such as whole-grain cereals, whole-wheat toast, low-fat or fat-free yogurt, whole grain pasta, brown rice, fruits and vegetables.
- Avoid saturated fats and too much protein. These types of fuels digest more slowly in your stomach and take away oxygen and energy-delivering blood from your muscles.



#2. Make a “Pit Stop”

During your workout, it is important to keep your body hydrated with small, frequent sips of water. For longer, high-intensity workouts, it is recommended that you eat 50-100 calories every half hour. These snacks should be carbohydrates such as raisins, an energy bar or banana.

#3. After: Refuel Your Tank

After a workout, be sure to refuel your body with fluids to rehydrate, carbohydrates to restore energy, and protein to help repair and build muscle.

* Article adapted from the American Heart Association website: www.heart.org.