

Sport Injury: Neck and Back Pain from Sports Activities

Back pain problems are very common in both athletes and non-athletes alike. Up to 20% of all sports injuries involve the lower back or neck.

In recent years, in addition to bicycling, running, swimming, racquetball, skiing, golf, and tennis, excessive, exhausting, and even punishing forms of sports, physical training, and exercise are being undertaken. These new types of extreme physical activities include bungee jumping, rollerblading, snowboarding, paragliding, and windsurfing, to name a few. All of these activities carry with them the risk of sports injuries.

Sports injuries result from acute trauma or repetitive stress associated with athletic activities which can affect bones or soft tissue and require specialized care to promote optimum healing.

For obvious reasons, athletes are at greater risk of sustaining a lumbar (lower) spine injury due to physical activity. Whatever the sport, the spine undergoes a lot of stress, absorption of pressure, twisting, turning, and even bodily impact.

There are four main causes of back pain in sports-active individuals:

- **Mechanical Low Back Pain**

This is the most common type of back problem seen in the sports-active individual. It accounts for 70-75% of all back problems and is usually the easiest to treat.

- **Facet Joint Syndrome**

The vertebrae are connected by small joints (facet joints) which may become strained and/or inflamed when they undergo forces when the spine is excessively twisting or arching, especially during activities such as tennis, racquetball, or golf.

- **Herniated Disc**

Also called a "slipped disc", a herniated disc is the most severe of low back disorders and occurs when the inner center of the disc pushes out, pressing on the nerves and causing pain in the back all the way down to the foot. This can create a condition known as "drop foot" due to strong pressure on the nerves.

The inter-vertebral discs can be injured by sudden and severe trauma. Much more common is a small disc bulge which might be present for some time and is only noted when a sports injury is medically evaluated. The good news is that very few herniated discs lead to persistent trouble or require surgery.

Although pain can last a few weeks, the majority of disc-related problems are a self-limiting medical condition which may be resolved with physical therapy, decompression, and medication, and very rarely requires surgery.

- **Degenerated Discs**

The discs act as shock absorbers for the spine cushioning the vertebrae. As we age, the discs can degenerate - drying out, shrinking, and losing elasticity and flexibility. Sometimes, a part of the outer covering of the disc wears away or tears, allowing the parts of the disc or its jelly-like contents to press on the spinal nerve roots. Then we may experience numbness, weakness, tingling, or shooting pain down the back of one leg.

Degenerative disc disease can result from trauma, infection, or the natural processes of aging. Some disc degeneration commonly occurs in people over 40 even without specific sports injuries.