

HEALTH

SPORTING CHANCE

As kids' sports become increasingly competitive, serious injuries are on the rise



Young athletes risk repetitive motion injuries if exposed to a sport for too long.

WITH baseball and softball season underway, the office of orthopedic surgeon and sports medicine specialist Christopher Ahmad, M.D. is filled with young players who have throwing injuries.

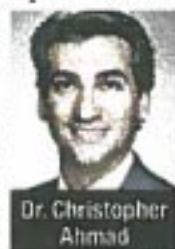
"My office is flooded with young kids injuring their shoulder and elbow," says Ahmad, head of Sports Medicine Center for the Developing Athlete at Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital at NY-Presbyterian/Columbia, and the team physician for the Yankees.

This new center, created for kids and teens who are athletes, offers prevention and treatment. It's certainly needed, as more than 2.6 million children are treated in emergency rooms each year for sports and recreation-related injuries. At the center, medical experts have particular expertise in disorders related to throwing, knee injuries (ACL tears), and concussion evaluation.

Ahmad is seeing an inordinate number of baseball pitchers this year, kids who want to play on multiple teams. "They develop pain and it's related to overuse. It's usually preventable," Ahmad says. "Sometimes

they are pressured to throw more because they are talented. Sometimes they tear tissues in their shoulder and elbow and need surgery. In my office I see 12-, 13-year-old pitchers and they are breaking down."

Even more troubling is that some kids actually seek out surgery as a performance-enhancer, says Ahmad, with some 50 percent of high school athletes surveyed believing it's appropriate to have surgery even if there is not an injury, to enhance performance.



Dr. Christopher Ahmad

"There is a sense of recklessness among kids who are pitchers, they believe if they hurt their elbow they can get surgery and they'll be even better," Ahmad says. "That is not true. Surgery takes a long time to recover from and it doesn't make you better."

To prevent injuries to throwing arms, kids need to rest, especially pitchers. "They should avoid pitching all year round," he says. "A pitcher needs four days off if you are a pro. A young pitcher needs several days off, three days off as a minimum."

Concussions are another common — and potentially severe — injury.

"Concussions are extreme-

ly challenging and once thought not to be a problem in our younger athletes," Ahmad says. "We are now realizing that concussions occur very frequently. Their brain is still developing and is very sensitive."

Once a concussion occurs, a child or teen "is more vulnerable to having difficulty with concentration, memory, headaches, and coordination," Ahmad says.

Beware that it's not simple to diagnose a concussion. One doesn't have to be unconscious, either.

"If a player acts confused in a game, that player should immediately be removed from the game and formally evaluated and he should not go back to the game if he is not cleared by a physician," Ahmad says.

Surprisingly, females suffer more concussions per athletic exposure than males. "There's lots of theories," Ahmad says, "but it's not clear why." — Diane Herbst