

Baseball And Your Feet



America's Pastime

For more than a century and a half, America has carried on a love affair with baseball. Kids slam fists in their first gloves and dream of one day playing in the big leagues. For a few, the dream comes true. The rest of us keep the fantasy alive through youth leagues, on adult softball teams, or pickup games with friends. We pledge allegiance to our favorite major league team, sharing the triumph or agony of every win and loss.

Abner Doubleday may not have really "invented" baseball in Cooperstown, New York in 1839 (the similar English game rounders predates it by nearly a century), but it didn't take long for Doubleday's game to evolve into our national pastime. The major leagues formed in 1871, and the modern era began in 1903 when the Pittsburgh Pirates defeated the Boston Red Sox in the first World Series. Since then, Americans fill ballparks on hot summer nights, and watch autumn's pennant races and championship playoffs culminate in the ultimate showdown between the best American and National league teams.

More than following big league baseball, we all want to play the game ourselves--to hear the crack of a base hit, execute an around-the-horn double play, or shag a screaming liner. But like all vigorous exercise, baseball and softball should be played sensibly and safely. Improper preparation and technique can lead to injury, especially to the lower extremities, which take us around the bases and under fly balls.

Before the First Pitch

Most American kids begin playing organized baseball at age 6 or 7. If a child is in generally good health and has no preexisting physically compromising conditions, baseball is relatively safe with proper instruction in the game's fundamentals.

Weekend warriors who pick up the sport again in adulthood are less apt to be in optimum condition than younger athletes, and should take it slow before jumping right into a game. Anyone who is more than 40 years old, diabetic, a smoker, or has any physical disability should see a family physician before taking the field. People with existing foot problems should see a podiatric physician specializing in sports medicine, who can perform a gait analysis and assess any risk inherent in a sports regimen.

Because baseball and softball involve quick starts and stops, it's important to loosen up before the game. Even the youngest children should make sure to do some simple stretching, running, and playing catch before the game to avoid muscle pulls or other problems.

Before playing pickup games, make sure the field is free of hazards like holes on the base path, which could cause a foot or ankle injury. Sticks, rocks, and other debris on the field cause players to trip, risking injuries, and should be removed.

Shoeing Up for Baseball

For children under the age of 10, sneakers will suffice for baseball, although kids probably will pine for cleats long before that. There's no real danger in them wearing cleats, but they should be gradually introduced before being worn in a game. A young player needs to get a feel for cleats, which should not be worn off the field.

While the improved traction of cleats may enhance play, it also leaves the ankle more susceptible to twists and turns. Any child with preexisting foot conditions should see a podiatric physician before putting on cleats. Never put a child in hand-me-downs;

ill-fitting cleats increase the danger of ankle injuries. When sizing cleats, make sure the feet are measured by a footwear technician, and always wear a game-size sock when trying them on.

In some competitive baseball leagues, the use of metal spikes is permitted for players more than 13 years old. Spikes must be understood as dangerous weapons on the base paths; they require a certain level of maturity to be worn safely. They are not necessary for casual play and should not be worn unless in league competition.

Spikes, which technology has made lighter and more flexible these days, perform the same function as cleats, but engage the ground differently. They too should be worn on a limited basis until the feel of how they engage the turf is understood. Unfamiliarity with spikes can lead to ankle twists and turns in a competitive situation.

When wearing cleats or spikes for the first time, watch for irritation, blisters, or redness, which could indicate a biomechanical problem in the legs or feet. Pain is a clear indicator of a problem. If cleats cause pain, discontinue wear for two to three days; if it returns, see a podiatric physician specializing in sports medicine for evaluation.

Preventing Baseball Injuries

One of baseball's most exciting moments comes when a batter stretches a single into a double by beating the tag in a dust-kicking slide. Sliding is a fun part of the game at all levels, but proper technique is crucial to avoiding foot and ankle injuries, especially when bases are firmly secured to the infield. Coaches at all levels should make sure their players are well schooled in proper sliding. Careless slides can result in sprains and even fractures of the lower leg and feet.

Pitchers also need to be coached on the proper way to come off an elevated mound with their back foot and land on an incline with the front foot. The repetitive motion of pitching can lead to overuse injuries to the feet and ankles. Pitchers experiencing pain in their windup should take a few days off before returning to the mound.

Catchers too are susceptible to overuse injuries by squatting behind home plate for every pitch. Again, coaches should teach their catchers how to alter their stance to vary weight displacement.

Lower Extremity Injuries and Treatment

Achilles Tendinitis: The stop-and-start of baseball often creates pain and tightness in the calf and aggravation of the Achilles tendon. Again, regular stretching of the calf muscles gently and gradually before and after the game will help minimize the pain and stiffness.

Contusions: A baseball will inevitably make contact with a player's foot and ankle, whether it's a pitched ball, foul tip, or line drive, and sliding base runners often run headlong into an infielder's legs. Usually this contact results in contusions, which are not often serious injuries. Ice packs and a few days' rest will usually help the contusions, or bruises, feel better.

Heel Spur Syndrome: A related condition, to which catchers are also susceptible, is heel spur syndrome. Often related to plantar fasciitis, heel spur syndrome occurs when the plantar tendon pulls at its attachment to the heel bone. This area of the heel can later calcify to form a spur. Many times the ligament pulling on the heel creates the symptoms, and not the spur itself, especially after getting up from resting. With proper warm-up and the use of supportive shoes, strain to the ligament can be reduced.

Plantar Fasciitis: Catchers are particularly susceptible to arch pain, commonly traced to an inflammation called plantar fasciitis, on the bottom of the foot. A podiatric physician can evaluate arch pain and may prescribe customized shoe inserts called orthoses to help alleviate the pain.

Shin Splints: Shin splints usually stem from an inflammation of the muscle and tendon attached to the shin, caused by stress factors. Treat shin pain with cold compresses immediately after a game to reduce inflammation. Proper stretching and strengthening exercises should prevent the onset of shin splints.

Sprains and Fractures: Stretched or torn ligaments, known as sprains, can occur from running the bases or pivoting to make a play. Sprains may cause extensive swelling around the ankle just like a fracture. Immediate treatment from a podiatric physician is crucial to quick healing. Fractures, where the bone has cracked or broken, often require casting. After a sprain or

fracture, a podiatric physician can prescribe a rehabilitation regimen to restore strength to the injured area before returning to the sport.

Baseball Tips

- Before playing pickup games, make sure the field is free of hazards like holes on the base path. Sticks, rocks, and other debris on the field cause players to trip, risking injuries, and should be removed.
- Under the age of 10, sneakers will suffice. A young player needs to get a feel for cleats, which should not be worn off the field.
- Don't forget to stretch regularly.
- Slide carefully. Careless slides can result in sprains and even fractures of the lower leg and feet.

The American Podiatric Medical Association operates a toll-free telephone service, **1-800-FOOTCARE (1-800-366-8227)**, from which consumers can obtain informative literature on a variety of foot health topics. The [American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine](#), an affiliate of APMA, may be reached at 1-800-438-3355.

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