

# Low Back Pain in Young Athletes May Be More Than Just Stiffness or Muscle Strain

by: Alex Minten, PT, DPT, CMTPT

Low back pain in children, especially young athletes, is not the same as in adults and should be taken seriously. While nearly half of low back pain in adults is due to disc-related problems this is only true in 11% of children with pain in this area. Recent studies have found that the most common reason for low back pain in young athletes is an acute or more commonly, an overuse injury of the spine itself. This article will examine why young athletes are more susceptible to structural problems of the spine and describe appropriate treatment of low back pain to ensure a pain-free athletic season.

Young athletes are commonly affected by structural injuries at a part of the vertebra called the pars interarticularis, which contributes to the joints of the spine. Parents should not immediately attribute their child's low back pain to "stiffness" or muscle strain. Not only are these general diagnoses less common in children than adults, but also being too quick to attribute pain to these reasons can delay appropriate diagnosis and treatment. Muscle strain should only be a diagnosis of exclusion. Children are at a higher risk for these types of injuries due to periods of growth where muscles and ligaments cannot keep up with bone growth. As a result children often develop muscle imbalances and decreased flexibility, which increase risk of injury. The age of maximum growth has been found to be 11-13 years of age for girls and 13-15 years of age for boys. Parent of young athletes experiencing low back pain should ask the following questions:

- When and how did the pain start?
- What does the pain feel like?
- Do you have pain anywhere else?
- Does anything make the pain worse?

Parents should also have their child evaluated by a healthcare practitioner that can indentify the cause of their child's pain if lasting longer than 2-3 weeks. This will help to develop a treatment plan that will allow the child to return to their normal level of activity as soon as possible.

One of the first steps in beginning to treat low back pain in young athletes is taking a break from athletic activities. While parents and athletes are often reluctant to miss out on practices and games this will be best for the child in the long run. Clinical treatment of low back pain in young athletes typically uses a multi-faceted approach that utilizes hands-on therapy and a therapeutic exercise program to eliminate muscle imbalances, improve flexibility, and optimize the curvature of the lumbar spine. Therapeutic interventions will also emphasize proper technique while completing sports-related activities

to make sure that the child's pain does not return once they begin playing their sport again. Once the young athlete is feeling better there is extensive education provided on how to ensure the pain does not return along with strategies on how to better prepare for upcoming seasons. With appropriate rest and treatment most athletes are able to gradually return to their sport without restriction.

*Alex Minten, DPT, CMTPT, works at Orthopedic & Spine Therapy Kaukauna, located at One Bank Avenue, Ste C. For more information, please call 920-759-9075.*

Keywords: athletes, low-back pain, physical therapy