

ON PARENTING



Basketball Injuries: 5 Ways to Keep Kids Safe

By NANCY SHUTE

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Video: Children's Health Quick Tips

Basketball is America's most popular team sport, but 375,000 children end up in emergency rooms each year after playing hoops, which is no fun at all. The number of traumatic brain injuries suffered by children playing basketball rose 70 percent from 1997 to 2007, according to a new study in *Pediatrics*, even though the total number of basketball injuries declined over that time.

[Concussions Pose a Long-Term Health Threat to Young Athletes]

Part of the increase in traumatic brain injuries, or TBIs, is no doubt due to increased awareness that a concussion, which is a mild traumatic brain injury, can lead to permanent [brain damage](#) if an injured child continues to play a contact sport like basketball without having time to heal. But the authors of the new study, conducted at the Center for Injury Research and Policy at [Nationwide Children's Hospital](#) in Ohio, speculate that the increase in concussions and other TBIs may also be due to rougher, more competitive play at ever-younger ages.

Fortunately, TBIs are still relatively rare in basketball, accounting for approximately 4 percent of injuries that brought children to the ER, the researchers found. Sprains and strains were the most common, accounting for 45 percent of injuries, followed by dislocations and fractures, at 22 percent. But the proportion of injuries that were TBIs doubled for boys and tripled for girls during that time period. And TBIs can be the most devastating of all the injuries listed, since they can cause lifelong cognitive problems.

[How to Reduce the Risks of Sports Concussions in Young Athletes]

Reducing the risk of basketball injuries, and particularly head injuries, should become part of the game for all families who love the sport. Here is advice from the experts:

- **Wear protective equipment.** Helmets aren't practical for basketball, alas, but mouth guards and eye protection can shield teeth and eyes, while ankle and knee braces or taping can protect a vulnerable joint.
- **Warm up.** The [American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons](#) recommends warming up the spine and legs before practice or a game with exercises like jumping jacks and running in place, followed by gentle stretches.
- **Practice good technique.** When jumping, land on a bent knee rather than a straight one, the orthopedists recommend.
- **Play nice.** "Collisions are a major cause of traumatic brain injuries in basketball," says Lara McKenzie, an assistant professor of pediatrics at [Nationwide Children's Hospital](#) and senior author of the study. "Basketball is also seeing increasing competitiveness at younger ages. We really try to discourage that kind of rough play."
- **Know the signs of concussion, and don't let children play when hurt.** Playing with a head injury increases the likelihood of permanent brain damage. Parents, coaches, and players need to be up to speed on the [signs of concussion](#), and willing to bench a player who suffers a blow to the head.

"We don't want to discourage children from playing basketball," McKenzie says. "We just want kids to be as safe as possible when they are playing."

Basketball is a great sport, and all children should get a chance to learn it and enjoy it. But no one should have to end up with a serious head injury as a result. This latest news is a wake-up call for parents to make sure their children—and coaches—put playing safe ahead of playing hard.

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