



# GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS, ATHLETES & COACHES

## SOCCER

Online Issue 1

Soccer is the most popular participant sport in the world, and has been one of the fastest growing sports in the United States over the last 30 years. It is popular among young athletes due to its use of basic motor skills that are relatively easy to learn, its lack of expensive equipment, and the social aspects of team participation. Although ideal height, weight, and speed are important, they are not essential for success, and certainly not necessary for the fun of the game. Parents often encourage soccer due to the perception of a lower injury rate than many other popular sports. However, soccer does share many of the medical concerns of other contact / collision sports, and does have some unique injury patterns and special considerations.

### Conditioning

Soccer is an aerobic sport involving running, jumping, kicking, and rapid changes in direction. Proper stretching before games and practices is important for injury prevention. Also, proper attention to hydration, especially in areas of high temperature and humidity is essential. Because soccer can be played by young children, the proper balance of conditioning, skill development, and fun play is very important. A good coach, with the support of parents, is invaluable in this goal.

### Equipment / Special Conditions

**Shin Guards** – Despite the fact that many leg fractures occur with players wearing shin guards, shin protection is still recommended for all practices and games.

**Shoes** – Shoes with molded cleats or ribbed soles are recommended for injury prevention (rather than removable, baseball- or football-type spikes).

**Other Equipment** – Both eye protection (with polycarbonate lens) and mouth guards are recommended. As a contact / collision sport, athletic supporters with a protective cup are recommended in males.

**Goalposts** – Most soccer fatalities occur through contact with the goalposts, usually resulting from goalposts falling on players. Properly anchoring goalposts is essential in limiting this injury, and padding of the goalposts should be strongly considered. Players should never be allowed to hang or swing from the goalposts.

**Ball** – Waterproof, synthetic-covered balls should be used for youth soccer, as leather balls can become heavy when wet, and increase the risk of injury.

**Field Conditions** – Despite the inability of coaches and parents to control the weather, attention to good field conditions is important in preventing injury. Filling in holes whenever possible, and removing debris from the field should always be done prior to games or practices.

**Rules / Coaching** – 40% of lower leg fractures occur during slide tackles. In addition, an estimated 15 to 25% of soccer injuries occur as a result of a rule infraction. Proper teaching of both the skills needed for safe play, as well as the rules of the game, is an invaluable part of injury prevention. Insistence on fair play, and strict adherence to the rules, is an essential part of the teamwork of good coaching and supportive parents.

### Head Injuries / Heading

Most severe head injuries in soccer are caused by collisions with other players or with the goalposts. Recently, questions have been raised with regard to brain function and the safety of allowing children to head a soccer ball. All the information needed to answer this question with certainty is still being gathered. Until more facts are known, common sense must prevail. Heading should not be encouraged until the child can learn the skills needed to head safely. Proper technique is essential (contact with the forehead, neck held rigid, and legs used to propel the player toward the ball). Players unwilling to head the ball should never be forced to do so.

### Safety Rules

1. Goalposts must be properly secured at all times, and padding is strongly encouraged. Players should never be allowed to hang or swing from goalposts.
2. Shin guards should be worn at all times.
3. Mouth guards and eye protection are recommended. Eye glasses should be secured with a sports strap. Athletic supporters with a protective cup should be worn by males.
4. Discourage hair combs, barrettes, or any jewelry during play.

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