

Weekend Warrior Alert!
Sports-Related Injuries Require Special Care

By Gabriel Chua, M.D., a family medicine physician affiliated with Sutter Regional Medical Foundation and Sutter Solano Medical Center.

When a professional baseball pitcher injures his rotator cuff or a professional tennis player sprains her knee, it usually makes headlines. Spectators and sports writers wonder how the treatment will go and whether the athlete will be able to perform as well as before the injury.

The same drama doesn't occur when mere mortals have sports-related injuries, but that doesn't lessen the strain for the people involved. Gabriel Chua, M.D., a family medicine physician with a background in sports medicine and who is affiliated with Sutter Regional Medical Foundation and Sutter Solano Medical Center, has treated many athletes and sports enthusiasts who were injured pursuing activities they enjoy, such as skiing.

"I've seen two types of injuries—those that are the result of accidents, and those in which the patient's deconditioning—or losing fitness—played a role," says Dr. Chua. "In either case, the athlete is devastated and knows he or she won't be able to compete for a while and may even be facing a lengthy rehabilitation period."

Dr. Chua says that regardless of whether an injury occurs at a major-league ballpark or a company picnic softball game, getting immediate attention is key. He finds that some athletes try to tough it out—usually to their harm.

The Road to Recovery

An exam will determine the extent of the injury, at which time the physician can discuss treatment options. Although a diagnosis of a sprain is typically good news—it's better than a fracture—sprains can take up to three months to heal, depending on how severe they are.

“Someone with a grade 1 sprain will usually be all right after two to three weeks of icing the area, elevating it and getting plenty of rest,” says Dr. Chua. “Grade 2 sprains, which are partial tears, and grade 3 sprains, which are complete tears, will keep athletes on the bench a lot longer.”

Healing times vary from person to person, but when broken bones are involved, the treatment and rehabilitation process can last for a full year. Shoulder problems also take a while to heal, as do groin problems.

Know How to Move Your Body

Dr. Chua says that stretching is critical before playing any sport, especially for older athletes whose tendons can rupture without a proper warm-up period. He also notes that it’s important to practice proper body movement, or mechanics.

“I had a 23-year-old come to me with rotator cuff issues that developed due to poor mechanics while rowing,” says Dr. Chua. “Even though he had a tear, we decided to treat it conservatively, so I referred him to an orthopedic sports medicine physician. That young man must change his rowing technique to ensure that the injury doesn’t recur or result in the end of his ability to row.”

The Value of Physical Therapy

Once a physician has treated a patient with a sports-related injury, it’s time for the physical therapy part of recovery to begin. Sutter Regional Medical Foundation offers physical therapy services through care centers in Vacaville and Fairfield to help patients regain their pre-injury functionality.

Rich Adkins, a physical therapist at Sutter Regional Medical Foundation, says that each patient receives a personal treatment plan. The plan is developed based on the patient’s history, range of motion, strength and special orthopedic tests. Physical therapy can last from two to four weeks to four months or longer.

“We get some people who don’t believe in the value of physical therapy when they first come in, but by the end of their time here, they’re glad they came,” says Adkins. “Our goal is to get patients better as fast as we can, and we do that by providing specialized treatment and staying on the cutting edge of our industry.”

While equipment—including stationary bikes, weight machines and upper arm bikes—is used when appropriate, most therapy is not equipment-driven so patients can continue therapy at home. Homework may include range-of-motion exercises and exercises geared to work specific muscles.

“We know that therapy is hard work, so we try to make things as fun as possible,” says Adkins. “In addition to focusing on regaining mobility, we also instruct patients on how to take care of themselves once they’ve ‘graduated’ from therapy. We don’t see too many repeat offenders among athletes; they definitely don’t want to come back, regardless of how entertaining we try to be as a staff.”

Looking for a Doctor to Get You Back in the Game?

If you have a sports-related injury and are looking for a sports injury specialist, call 1-800-4SUTTER or visit www.thedoctorforyou.com. Physical therapy is available through Sutter Regional Medical Foundation by physician referral only. To learn more about the process, call 707-427-4900.