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Avoiding Heel Pain in Young Athletes

SPRING IS IN THE AIR and it is time to get our children outside and off the electronics. Kids usually respond well to this transition, but in today's highly competitive youth sports world, we are seeing more overuse injuries in children. It is hard to hold back a budding athlete but, there are simple things we can do to help our children and make it less likely for them to develop a common injury from doing too much.

As children constantly grow, the bones are growing longer, and the muscles are growing stronger. The connectors are the ligaments and tendons. This pattern, plus added use from their sport of choice, can lead to the overuse injury.

In the foot and ankle, the developing skeletal system has multiple open growth plates that will not fully close until 15-19 years old. Before that age range, these growth plates are like spongy bone—they are the center of the growth and allow the bones to get larger. The growth plates are designed for trauma, but with the added activity they get pushed to their limits. The constant forces on them and the pulling from the stronger muscle causes inflammation which leads to pain. This pain is most commonly felt in the heel bone of the

foot. This pain is called Calcaneal Apophysitis, or Sever's disease. If left untreated, it can lead to intense pain and early closure of the growth plate which could lead to structural deformity.

Yikes! But the good news is, this can be avoided. Every child is susceptible to this, but some are more prone than others. Many factors contribute to this disease. Size, age, sport, shoe type, and flexibility of the person all contribute. So, if you want to keep your athlete on the field playing the sport they love, then start now with these modifications and your child should be able to avoid this injury.

SYMPTOMS OF SEVER'S DISEASE

Signs and symptoms of this condition are pain with activity in the heel of one or both feet. The child will start off with mild pain and the pain will increase with activity. They can usually play through the pain, but a visual limp can usually be seen. The pain will improve with rest, but will come back with activity. If your child is displaying any of these symptoms they should be evaluated by a podiatrist. A podiatrist will perform a clinical exam, as well as obtain X-rays to rule out any underlying fracture and evaluate the condition

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of the growth plates. A treatment regime will be prescribed of rest, ice, stretching, and supports for the injured area.

To avoid getting the injury, I recommend all young athletes start a daily routine of stretching and wearing supportive shoes for all activities of life.

The stretching should focus on the calf musculature. Simple calf lunges with the heel on the ground, or heel hanging off the stair for 15 seconds three times a day should be adequate. They will also need to get supportive shoes. The athletic shoe should provide a nice foundation for the athlete. It should bend at the toes and provide stiffness from the heel to the toes. Most athletic type of shoes are flat and do not provide much shock absorption for the developing foot. These shoes can be improved with an addition of a thin orthotic. Most over-the-counter orthotics are soft and gel-like. This is not what is recommended for this condition. We need something to add functional support to minimize the overuse of the ligaments and tendons. By taking these simple precautions, your child should be able to stay on the field and avoid development of this overuse injury. 



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