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June 16, 2016 8:00AM

SPINE & SPORTS: Spine fracture in youth athletes

Young athletes suffering with back pain are often dismissed by their doctors as simply having a muscle strain. In fact, a significant percentage of these individuals are in the early stages of a spine stress fracture or some other serious problem. As a sports chiropractor, I would never treat heart or lung disease, and while I took an obstetrics and gynecology course in chiropractic college, I wouldn't expect my female patients to consult me for OBGYN care. Pediatric doctors and nurses with little or no training in musculoskeletal examination and diagnosis should learn more about how to address back pain patients and refer them as needed to providers best equipped to diagnose and treat their patients.

Rule number one for medical doctors treating patients with back pain: stop telling them, "It's just a muscle strain!" Back pain is almost always more complicated than that, or it wouldn't be the leading cause of disability worldwide, and we would have no need for spine surgeons, chiropractors or physiatrists.

Back pain can originate from a variety of structures. Think about the spine and pelvis as a joint system consisting of bones, ligaments, muscles, tendons, firm cartilage that caps the bony connections, intervertebral (fibrocartilage) discs between the bones, and a web of connective tissue (fascia) that weaves it all together. All of these structures can cause pain, and none except for bone shows up on an X-ray, which is a crude diagnostic tool that should be reserved for assessing a big fracture or dislocation. In most cases MRI is the only appropriate diagnostic imaging tool for evaluation of the pediatric spine.



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A child's developing bones are flexible, more cartilaginous and less ossified compared to the rigid bones of an adult, and as a result, can only be compressed and bent so many times repeatedly before they crumble and break from the repetitive stress of sports. Their spine and pelvic bones have knobs or prominences called apophysis, where cartilage develops into bone, which are also the attachment points for tendons that can tug and inflame the bone, or pull the knob off altogether. Also vulnerable are the growth plates, or physis of their bones, where cartilage proliferates into bone. These can shift or slip and cause permanent impairment if left undiagnosed. Think of what happens to a metal hanger that is repeatedly bent back and forth: it will break.

When it comes to your child's back pain, allow only an expert to examine, diagnose, refer or provide treatment. More appropriately, all spine care should be directed by those most trained and experienced in the examination and treatment of the spine and not by those most trained to address internal illness. Not only will this save time by avoiding a merry-go-round of visits to different doctors, but it can spare your child suffering from the wrong treatment or the incorrect diagnosis. Chiropractors have the best training to examine, diagnose and conservatively treat musculoskeletal conditions, and a board-certified sports chiropractor is the best provider to help get your child back in the game!

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