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Spine & Sports: Why athletes need sports chiropractors

Sports chiropractors practice at many high-level athletic events, and there is good evidence to suggest why we are effective providers. I wrote this article while providing care at the 22nd Central American and Caribbean Games in Veracruz, Mexico. The athletes greatly appreciated us, but not everyone on the health-care team really understood why our procedures made physiologic sense.

Athletes cannot perform at their best if they feel pain. Pain causes a reflex that shuts down muscles. Limping after straining a knee or spraining an ankle is an example. A joint that does not cause pain but is stressed or malfunctioning in some way can also cause this same reflex. Called "reflex inhibition," an example would be when suddenly your knee buckles when you go down stairs.

To perform optimally, athletes need to exert themselves with strength, stability and a full range of motion. Strength and stability against a forceful load depends on several factors, one of which is full muscular engagement. If an athlete needs to press weight overhead and cannot withstand the load because of reflex inhibition, then the athlete must either drop the weight or risk straining and injuring the body.

Also, good muscle function depends on healthy fascia, which is the connective tissue "glue" that weaves its way throughout our body and sheaths all muscles. Fascia adds support to muscles and guides body movement. It is also a sensory system that is very painful when irritated. The natural consequence of soft tissue injury and repair is the formation of fibrous adhesions in the fascia. These adhesions feel like taught fibers, knots or "trigger points." They cause joint stiffness and pain, altered muscle control and also reflex inhibition. Adhesions also form when the body simply doesn't move for an extended period of time - thus the stiff arm after a cast is removed.

Lastly, joints that lack normal tracking or motion also can cause pain, stiffness, limited range of motion and reflex inhibition. Previously injured joints can malfunction without causing pain, such as in a "weak ankle" that randomly gives way and sprains. Athletes must have joints that function well and are free from reflex inhibition in order to have full strength and stability. Otherwise, the athlete is at risk for injury. This is where we sports chiropractors come in. Fascial adhesion and joint dysfunction make the perfect formula for reflex inhibition. Sports chiropractors are expert providers of the key interventions for improving joint movement and turning off reflex inhibition: soft tissue "myofascial" therapy and joint manipulation.

Research shows that skilled joint manipulation improves joint motion and reduces pain, and it has a host of neurophysiologic attributes, including turning off reflex inhibition. Drugs and ice packs do not offer such benefits. Yet ice has been applied mindlessly to athletes for decades. Other gizmos, such as bead-roller sticks, simply feel nice. Static stretching inhibits a muscle's ability to initiate force. Yet all too often athletes are stretched without knowing why that athlete is tight.

Most trainers and health-care providers don't know about a sports chiropractor's skill set.

We provide a thorough musculoskeletal examination and a diagnosis and then deliver expert hands-on procedures that athletes need and desire. This includes modalities such as kinesiology taping, low-level laser, low-tech rehab exercise and custom foot orthotics, for example. This package of care is valuable prior to play as well as for rehabilitation after an injury. It may also help optimize performance.

We have always known that athletes feel better following chiropractic care, but we can now also theorize with reasonable evidence why this is so. Medical providers, trainers, coaches and sports team officials can learn about the important role that sports chiropractors play by visiting the American Chiropractor Board of Sports Physicians site: www.ACBSP.com.

In the end, it is all about what the athlete needs and desires. They should have access to all avenues of care - for their benefit, not ours.

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