



Cheerleading Injuries

Cheerleading is more popular and more athletic than ever. Cheerleaders not only lead a crowd in cheers but also perform increasingly difficult dance routines, tumbling skills, pyramids, and stunts with partners. Although cheerleading generally is not a risky sport, the injuries that do occur can be severe. Cheerleaders must be healthy and strong to ensure their own safety and the safety of others on their squads.

Common Injuries

Muscle strains are common in the hip, lower back, and legs. Ligament sprains often occur in the knees and ankles.

However, when cheerleading injuries occur, the demands of the sport can make them severe. Among the more serious, sometimes season-ending, injuries are fractures, including those of the spine, and dislocations of the shoulder or elbow.

Causes of Injury

- performing skills too difficult for the cheerleader's current level
- poor conditioning or training
- poor nutrition
- lack of proper equipment for training or performance
- lack of experience with the sport or a particular skill
- poor flexibility
- lack of good core/abdominal strength
- lack of good arm and shoulder strength

Overuse Injuries

Cheerleading is a year-round sport, with games and competitions during every season. Cheerleaders often cheer for three seasons and then may take part in competitions. Continuous training and performance increase the chance of overuse injuries.

If your athlete complains of pain or soreness that prevents him or her from cheerleading for more than 48 hours, evaluation by a medical professional is advisable.

Preventing Injuries

Good warm-ups and conditioning are just as important in cheerleading as in every other sport. Practice should begin with a light cardiovascular warm-up followed by proper stretching of the shoulders, wrists, thigh muscles, and hip muscles. This will help provide the flexibility needed for tumbling skills and stunts.

Another way to decrease injuries is to make sure the cheerleader has learned the proper technique for basic skills before trying more difficult ones. Without a good foundation in the basics, performing higher level tumbling and stunts not only is more difficult, but also unsafe.

Cheerleaders also should practice in an area that has enough space, away from potential dangers such as walls, pillars, or crowds. When learning new skills, the cheerleader should always use gymnastic mats to ensure a softer landing from a fall or drop during a stunt. Extra spotters also are a good idea when learning or practicing new stunts.

Cheerleaders perform on different surfaces: football fields, running tracks, gymnasium floors, and even foam floors. Each surface has a different amount of cushioning and degree of levelness. Tumbling and stunts should be practiced on every surface. In addition, when moving from outdoor football season to indoor basketball season, it's best to decrease the intensity of the training. This allows the body to adjust to the firmer, less forgiving surface of the basketball court. Any time a switch is made from one surface to another, adjustments to the intensity of practice will reduce the chance of injuries.

The American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Administrators (AACCA) offers a safety education program for cheerleading coaches and athletes. The AACCA also has enacted rules limiting the height of pyramids; the number of bases needed to perform stunts; and surface requirements for tumbling, basket tosses, and throws. For more information, visit www.aacca.org.

What is the Young Athlete Program?

UPMC Sports Medicine's Young Athlete Program brings together a network of specialists that provides individualized attention for injury prevention and management.

Our physicians and physical therapists use cutting-edge, science-based techniques to help speed recovery, and quickly and safely prepare the athlete to return to the field of play. Athletic trainers, sports performance coaches, and other experts focus on injury prevention, nutrition, conditioning, and activity-specific training.

Regardless of age or sport, the Young Athlete Program has the expertise, technology, and services to make a difference for your athlete. For more information or to make an appointment, call **412-432-3700** or visit UPMC.com/SportsMedicine.

Our partner, Centers for Rehab Services, offers your young athlete physical therapy services at more than 40 convenient locations. To find an office near you, or to make an appointment, call **412-432-3700**.