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**4 Ways to Reduce Risk of Injury**

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As an Athletic Trainer, I see different injuries every single day. I never know what type of injury may appear at my office door or what may happen as a student athlete is participating in their sport. Whether a calf cramp or unconscious athlete (such as a neck injury), most injuries are preventable, but some unforeseen.

Here are four simple ways to reduce your risk of injury:

1. **Aerobic exercises.**

This is exercise that increases your heart rate and breathing – also known as cardio. According to the American Heart Association (AHA), children 6-17 years of age should get a minimum of 60 minutes per day of moderate- to vigorous- aerobic activity. Whether dancing to a favorite song, gardening as a chore (parents will appreciate it), swimming laps around the pool while getting some Vitamin D (be sure to use sunscreen) or biking around your neighborhood, the goal is to get your heart pumping!

1. **Incorporating strength training.**

Resistance work increases the integrity of your muscles and bones. The AHA recommends children ages 6-17 should incorporate strength exercises into their routine at least 3 days per week. This could be body weight exercise, such as push-ups, squats, or planks – which are all a great starting point for those without equipment. These exercises are also easily modifiable, too. Starting with wall push-ups and progressing to the floor, or even starting out with push-ups on your knees and progressing to your feet, serve as great transitions to increase intensity gradually. Another great modification is depth – starting with a slight bend in the elbows of a push-up and gradually deepening or dropping a few inches into a squat and progressively lowering. Regardless of your starting point, begin where you are comfortable and work to increase your duration, repetition, or depth in gradual fashion. If ever a progression feels too hard, then go back to the level you were doing it at and increase the sets and repetitions. As these types of exercises begin to get easier, begin incorporating weights or bands for more resistance. I often suggest push/pull exercises to ensure both sides are worked properly. For example, if working upper body in one workout (I’d recommend biceps, forearms, back - all pull exercises) try working the upper body through different movements in the next (I’d recommend triceps, chest, and shoulders - all push exercises). These workouts can be separated by a rest day or the following day. This will ensure efficiency and balanced muscles.

1. **Taking time to increase your flexibility.**

Being limber is a major component of reducing injury that a lot of people either forget about or simply do not make time for. Stretching before *and after* exercise is beneficial in helping to reduce muscle tension, improve range of motion and decrease soreness. I know I do not stretch as much as I should and I regret it as soon as I feel achy or sore. Stretching is something that can be incorporated throughout the day through a brief simple habit such as gently reaching for your toes to stretch your posterior chain. I remind those I train with to avoid bouncing during stretching (ballistic stretching) as it can be too forceful and push you past natural range of motion to actually cause injury. I encourage athletes to do dynamic warm ups (5-10 minutes is all that’s needed) that naturally stretch the muscles through movement, such as high knees, butt kicks and arm circles to get the entire body moving and ready for the exercise. I also encourage my athletes to take a few minutes to complete simple, static stretching following any exercise – to decrease next-day soreness.

1. **Improving balance.**

Improving your balance takes patience, but it is very beneficial. It increases strength and stability in several muscle groups that athletes rely on to perform at their best, including core, legs, glutes and back. Perhaps the best thing about balance exercises is that they can be done anywhere, at any time and all you need is yourself. Examples of balance exercises include simulated tightrope walking, single leg standing, walking with alternating knee lifts, the list goes on. These can all become more advanced by maintaining the position for longer, closing your eyes (make sure there is nothing around you that you might fall onto, for safety), or letting go of a support you’re using, like a chair or wall. These movements can also coincide with your strength training to stabilize your muscles.

I want all athletes that I train to live a long and healthy life, so incorporating these four types of movement and activity can help you beyond just injury reduction. Doing these activities also helps reduce risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and high blood pressure. They can even aid in better sleep quality. I have seen my niece run around for hours on end, like the Energizer bunny. I’d venture to say that she sleeps well because of all of the exercise she completed and energy she expended.

After a year of change throughout 2020, I know that exercise has helped me and I hope it can you, too. To lose weight, to lessen anxiety, to improve confidence and performance, to simply apply healthy habits for long-term healthy living. Whatever your reason, I challenge you to increase the amount, the variety and – over time – the intensity of the exercises listed above. Here’s to greater performance and less injury.