

# Who gets lower back pain?

Hockey is becoming increasingly more physical at all levels both on and off of the ice. On the ice, there is more physical contact in today's game. The younger players are becoming faster and stronger than they were even five to 10 years ago. Off the ice, young players are working out more, training and cross training to get into better physical and playing shape and condition. All of this can lead to an increased risk of back injuries.

Although lower back pain is still uncommon in hockey, the number of injuries are increasing. Usually, young athletes will not complain of lower back pain unless it is persistent and limits their activities of hockey. Most of the time it is others (parents, coach or friends) that may first notice a change in behavior and or posture before the player, themselves.

## How to evaluate lower back pain

There are many causes of lower back pain.

You must first look for developmental growth problems. This can definitely be done with a thorough preseason physical. The most common concern is to screen for scoliosis (curvature of the spine), spondylolytic (slippage of the spine) and leg length difference. There are developmental problems that may or may not lead to back pain.

Mechanical back pain, meaning an acute injury needs to be addressed quite aggressively if it lasts for more than two-three days without any improvement. If the acute injury lasts for more than two-three weeks it is quite concerning. It is even more of a concern if it is not resolved in six weeks. All of these situations need to be addressed by a physician. Young athletes should not have any back pain.

You must look at flexibility or a decrease



## ASK THE DOCTOR

By Dr. Jeff S. Pierce



in flexibility after an injury.

When there is pain with bending forward/backward/twisting/sitting/walking/running and especially pain when lying down, it needs to be evaluated. Spondylolytic, cartilaginous end-plate abnormalities and infectious causes are most common in the 10-to-15-year-old age group and disc pain and mechanical back problems are more common in the older age groups.

If you notice numbness, tingling, weakness, fever, weight loss or pain not relieved with rest, the athlete needs to be evaluated as soon as possible. If you notice problems with bowel or bladder, especially loss of control this needs immediate medical evaluation.

## Treatment

After proper evaluation, you and your physician should be able to design an appropriate treatment program.

You may need further evaluation with x-ray, MRI, blood work or even nerve testing. Hopefully, after correct diagnosis, you will need a structured rehab program. For simple strains and sprains, a home exercise program should be beneficial. For more involved injuries, a program designed with your physician, a certified physical therapist

and/or athletic trainer for a more appropriate and aggressive course of treatment.

Ice, heat and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications are commonly incorporated in the treatment program. Flexibility and strength are very important to treatment and prevention of back pain. The most common problem area with hockey players is tight hamstrings. You need to have flexibility in the hamstrings and lower back. Usually after you are approximately 75-80 percent pain free, you can start a more aggressive strengthening program design with your doctor, therapist and/or athletic trainer.

In summary, lower back pain is uncommon in young athletes so you must seek out treatment sooner than later with this type of injury. It is not always the player who notices the problem first, so parents and coaches need to be aware of signs and symptoms.

You must find a physician, therapist and/or athletic trainer who is very familiar with young hockey players for proper and aggressive treatment to get back on the ice as soon as possible.

Don't let your game go backwards because of a back injury!