

[IMAGE]

Summer Spinal Safety

Stay in the Game

By Dr. Kevin M. Wong

Summer sports are a favorite pastime of beachgoers and sun lovers everywhere. From bicycle riding and swimming to football, baseball and volleyball, outdoor activities can put a great deal of strain on your spine. Find out what your body needs to stay in the game.

As we move into the summer months, the weather has become more inviting, and many of you will begin or increase your outdoor activities. Some of you may decide to revisit exercise routines or sporting activities that you abandoned during the colder winter months. For others, you may be increasing your activity level since it feels so wonderful to be outside. I applaud you for being proactive about your health.

There are a multitude of activities that become more prevalent during these months, including tennis, bike riding, water sports, hiking and beach-related sports, to name a few. Whatever activity you choose, make sure you protect your body and use sound judgment so you don't put yourself at risk for injury.

Your body is an amazing thing. When your spine, bones, joints, muscles, tendons and ligaments are all working well, you take no notice that your body is doing what it is supposed to. However, when your body is stressed or damaged, either from a single injury or over time, it starts letting you know. You may feel tight muscles, stiffness, a reduced ability to move comfortably, and even pain. These signs should not be covered up with medication. That's like taking the batteries out of a smoke detector during a fire.

We have an important responsibility to make sure we listen to our own bodies. By taking the time to make sure our bodies are safe when we exercise, we can maintain our spinal function, along with the function of our muscles and connective tissue, and keep ourselves pain-free. Now *that's* prevention.

Start With a Warm-Up

Two men playing frisbee. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Before you participate in any activity, you should thoroughly warm up your back and your body. You should especially focus on warming up the

muscles you will be using most in the sport you are playing. Start by increasing your heart rate gradually with simple movements, such as walking or jogging. Then stretch your neck, shoulder, arm, lower back, hamstring and calf muscles. Finally, start out slowly when you begin your activity.

Your chiropractor is an expert at evaluating your body's structure. He or she can identify and correct any weaknesses or imbalances that could make you more susceptible to injuries. Your chiropractor also can provide you with a series of exercises to help improve your athletic performance.

Hiking

Summer is a great time to take advantage of nature's beautiful sights, and hiking is a way to experience the great outdoors while giving your body a good workout. But hiking has its drawbacks; in particular, walking for long periods of time on uneven terrain presents the opportunity for injury and fatigue.

Hiking Symbol - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Effects on the Spine**

- Shoes that do not fit properly can cause pain, and without the proper traction for a particular terrain, you could slip, trip or fall and injure your spine (or another part of your body).
- When you walk, your spine is supported by one leg at a time, which decreases your stability.
- Although not as severe as when running, contact force is still transmitted to your spine and can damage your joints.

A man and woman backpacking. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Prevention**

- Wear comfortable shoes with proper traction.
- Use a walking stick to take some of the pressure off your body.
- Wear flexible, custom-made orthotics that contain shock-absorbing materials and help stabilize the body.

Running Symbol - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Running**

Running can exert five times a person's body weight on the feet and ankles. This force travels up the legs, through the hips to the spine and head, potentially causing muscle, joint and back pain. You must take measures to protect yourself; otherwise, your joints, cartilage and other connective tissue can get damaged - leading to arthritis or worse.

A woman jogging behind a man who is mountain biking. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Effects on the Spine**

- When your heel makes contact with a hard surface, it creates a shock force that travels up the legs to your spine and head, damaging joints along the way.
- Muscles in the back work hard to stabilize the body and maintain proper posture while you run.
- The forces of running jerk and compact spinal joints and discs.

Prevention

- Wear properly fitting running shoes that have good cushion.
- Wear flexible, custom-made orthotics that contain shock-absorbing materials.
- Avoid running on hard surfaces.
- Avoid long-distance running.
- Use your abdominal muscles to help stabilize your posture.

Biking

Biking Symbol - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Biking is a great form of exercise, especially during the warmer months, and the entire family can participate, from young to old. It is easier on the knees than running and hiking; however, you can still injure your back if you're not careful.

In particular, mountain biking, an increasingly popular activity, can subject your body to considerable stress. Here are a few of the potential consequences, along with tips on how to minimize your risk of injury.

Effects on the Spine

- Poor riding posture (pulling up, holding your neck forward, flexing your back muscles) can damage spinal muscles and joints.
- Uneven or rough terrain can jerk and compact spinal joints/discs.

Prevention

- Periodically shift your neck to loosen your muscles.
- Make sure to distribute your weight appropriately to take some of the pressure off your back.
- Adjust the bike so it fits your body.

- Choose a bike that best suits your needs (e.g., don't choose a racing bike to go mountain biking).

Swimming

Swimming Symbol - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Swimming is a popular activity, particularly as people visit beaches and local swimming pools this summer. Some gyms also offer swimming facilities. If you have experienced lower back or hip problems in the past, the type of swimming stroke you choose is important in order to avoid putting undue stress on the body.

Effects on the Spine

- Butterfly strokes cause the shoulders and upper body to come out of the water, placing considerable stress on the lower back.
- Freestyle (front) strokes and breast (crawl) strokes can cause your lower back to be hyperextended.
- Breast strokes and butterfly strokes involve wide leg kicks and are not as gentle on the body as freestyle swimming.
- During freestyle swimming, your neck (cervical spine) is jerked back and forth repetitively when you take breaths.

Prevention

- Avoid hurting your neck when you take breaths by using a snorkel.
- Young girl swimming underwater. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Use a kickboard or some other type of flotation device to help maintain the correct form.
- Use your abdominal muscles to keep your body level in the water.
- Side and back strokes are better than front strokes.

Taking a few moments to evaluate how you are performing your activities this summer will go a long way in preventing injuries. More importantly, if you have previously been injured, changing the way you perform the activity will be safer for your body and help prevent future injuries from occurring. Now get out there and have some fun!

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