It is March, the time of year when your children are starting to play little league baseball, softball, soccer, or some other spring sport. Playing outdoors brings a lot of enjoyment for children and parents, especially after a few months of indoor winter activity. As a result, exercise levels tend to increase and often times, injuries appear. Injuries to children’s spines are not unique to contact sports like football, soccer, or martial arts, though they are also seen in non-contact sports like competitive cheerleading and gymnastics.
As more and more kids are becoming involved in sporting activities, many parents (and their children) could be overlooking the importance of proper nutrition and body conditioning needed for preventing injuries both on and off the playing field. Most sports provide a very positive experience for children, though if not properly prepared, playing any sport can turn into a bad experience.

The best advice for parents who have children involved in athletics is to help them prepare their bodies, and to learn to protect themselves from sports-related injuries before they happen. A proper warm-up exercise and stretching program is essential for youths involved in sports. However, many children learn improper stretching techniques, or do not stretch at all, making them more susceptible to injury. Both parents and coaches need to work with their kids and make sure they receive the proper sports training.

Before participating on any given day, young athletes should begin with a slow jog to warm up, and stretch all the major muscle groups, including the legs, arms, and back. Holding the stretches, rather than bouncing, for 5–10 seconds will gain the most benefit. As children get older, the stretches can be held for longer periods of time and proper weight lifting can be introduced when they become teenagers.

Proper nutrition and hydration are also extremely vital. The requirement of drinking eight to ten 8-ounce glasses of water every day is not only for adults. These days, too many youths drink soda, juice, and milk for hydration, even though water is the best for proper absorption into the body.

Young athletes today often think they are invincible. The following tips can help ensure your child does not miss a beat when it comes to the proper fitness, stretching, training, and rest that the body needs in order to engage in any sporting activity.

**Encourage Your Child To:**

**Follow a warm-up routine.** Be sure your child or his/her coach includes a warm-up and stretching session before and after every practice, game or meet. A slow jog, calisthenics, and/or lifting small weights reduce the risk of ripped or torn muscles. Flexibility becomes key
Keep Your Young Athlete Healthy and Fit

Written by Pamela Stone, DC, FICPA
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when trying to score that extra goal or make a critical play.

**Maintain a healthy weight.** Children that are overweight are unhealthy just as much as youths that are underweight. Be sure your child does not feel pressured into being too thin and that he/she understands proper nutrition and caloric intake is needed for optimal performance and endurance.

**Drink water.** Hydration is a key element to optimal fitness and function. Teenage athletes should drink at least eight 8-ounce glasses of water a day. Younger athletes should drink five to eight 8-ounce glasses of water.

**Avoid sugar-loaded, caffeinated, and/or carbonated drinks.** Sports drinks are a good source of replenishment for kids engaged in long-duration sports, or those exercising more than 60 minutes.

**Wear the proper equipment when required and make sure that the equipment is properly fitted to the child.** Make sure all equipment, including gloves, shoes, and helmets fit your child or adolescent properly.

**Eat healthy meals.** Make sure your young athlete is eating a well-balanced diet and does not skip meals. Avoid high-fat foods, such as candy bars, fried food, and fast food. At home, provide fruit and vegetables rather than cookies and potato chips.

**Get plenty of rest.** Eight hours of sleep is ideal for young athletes. Lack of sleep and rest can catch up with the child and decrease performance.

**Have your child examined by a Chiropractor.** Doctors of Chiropractic are licensed and trained to care for the neuromusculoskeletal system and can provide advice on sports training, nutrition, and injury prevention to young athletes. A proper chiropractic evaluation by a qualified pediatric chiropractor can keep them in the game and help to minimize if not prevent injuries, particularly injuries leading to spinal injuries. Often, minor spinal injuries go unnoticed until adulthood, when pain sets in and it thus takes longer to make corrections.