



Maximize Recovery in Young Athletes

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Young athletes seem to be training harder and longer than ever before. Some school-based strength and conditioning programs rival those at the college level, and it is not uncommon for some young athletes to train five days per week and compete on the weekends. While the potential health and fitness benefits of youth strength and conditioning programs have received increased attention in recent years, the importance of adequate recovery between workouts seems to be overlooked. In fact, more has been written about how to prepare young athletes for sport than how to best recovery from one workout to the next. Although a day ‘off’ between workouts maybe adequate for recreational fitness participants, sport involves higher levels of physical and psychological stress, and therefore well-planned activities are needed to maximize recovery and return to an optimal performance state.

Since recovery is an integral part of the training cycle, youth coaches need to pay just as much attention to what is done between training sessions as to what is done during training sessions. Strength and conditioning activities place a great amount of stress on the neuromuscular system, and therefore the importance of adequate recovery needs to be reinforced regularly. This may be particularly important for adolescent athletes who may be unwilling to reduce the volume and/or intensity of their training program. Youth coaches and parents should realize that the ‘more is better’ attitude is counterproductive and will likely result in injury, burnout or poor performance. The following safe and simple practices may help young athletes recovery from sports training and competition.

1. **Cool-down.** All games and workouts should end with an active cool-down session designed to remove lactic acid and lessen the likelihood of muscle soreness. Light jogging and stretching have proven to be effective.

2. **Post-Exercise Fuel.** Take advantage of the ‘golden hour’ after each game or workout by consuming a food snack or beverage containing carbohydrates and protein. This will quickly refuel carbohydrate stores and result in a faster buildup of muscle proteins.

3. **Stay hydrated.** Replenish body fluids and electrolytes by drinking water, juice, sports drinks and other caffeine-free beverages throughout the day, even when you’re not thirsty. Since caffeine can act as a diuretic, caffeinated beverages such as coffee, tea and soda can increase your risk for dehydration. Stay hydrated during the game or workout by drinking cool beverages every 15 to 20 minutes. Any weight lost during the workout should be replaced during the recovery period.

4. **Contrast Shower.** A post-workout contrast shower (alternating 30 sec. warm and 30 sec. cold for 3 to 4 cycles) may help to restore fatigued functions and minimize inflammation following intense exercise.

5. **Self Massage.** Foam rollers and massage ‘sticks’ can be used to minimize muscle stiffness and promote feelings of relaxation.

6. **Adequate sleep.** Most teenagers need about 8 to 9 hours of sleep per night and young athletes may need more than that. When appropriate, a ‘power nap’ in the afternoon can help one feel reenergized.

7. **Music.** Listening to music can be a relaxing activity that can aid in the recovery process.

Realize that the type of music used to maximize recovery is a personal choice.

8. **Socialize.** Spend time with family, teammates as well as people not involved in your sport.

Social gatherings at school events or parties can have a positive impact on one's emotional and psychological well-being.

9. **Visualization.** After practice and games, take a few quiet minutes to "visualize" your body recovering from the workout. Engage in slow, deep breathing and think about getting stronger, feeling better and removing soreness from your body.

10. **Vary Workouts.** Make workouts more fun by systematically altering 'hard' days and 'easy' days. Some young athletes may need to learn what 'easy' training feels like.

Remember that recovery is a proactive process which involves more than a day 'off' between workouts. With a systematic use of some or all of the methods highlighted in this article, young athletes will recover faster from the stress of training and competition. Coaches, parents and athletes should talk about the potential benefits of different recovery strategies, and should realize that what works for one athlete may not be effective for another.

Selected References

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