



Common fencing injuries

A safe "combat" sport

For a sport with origins in warfare and dueling, fencing is fairly safe. High quality equipment and strict rule enforcement have reduced the risk of injury for this "combat sport."

Still, fencers may sustain injuries. Overuse injuries, such as strains, sprains and soreness, affect the ankles, wrists, knees and hips of participants who practice too much. Minor cuts and bruises are also common. Punctures, usually the result of broken equipment, may occur, but these injuries are rare. Catastrophic injuries are exceedingly rare in fencing.



Player Safety

Common accidents, serious injuries

Cuts, scratches and bruises

With metal weapons flying about, cuts, scratches and bruises are inevitable. The bicep of the arm holding the weapon is most vulnerable, but the chest, hands, back and legs may also be affected. Most of these injuries are minor.

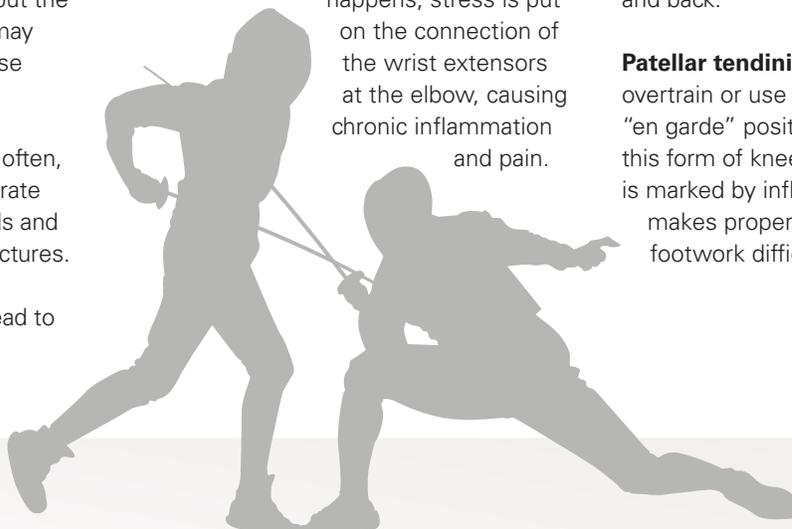
Punctures It doesn't happen often, but broken blades may penetrate the skin. Fencing jackets, pads and masks can prevent most punctures.

Sprains Poor footwork can lead to slips and falls that may cause ankle sprains.

Fencer's elbow An overuse injury similar to tennis elbow, fencer's elbow is caused by repetitive arm motion when a fencer grips the weapon too tightly. When this happens, stress is put on the connection of the wrist extensors at the elbow, causing chronic inflammation and pain.

Pulled muscles Sudden movements and overextended limbs can cause pulled muscles in the arms, legs and back.

Patellar tendinitis Fencers who overtrain or use improper form in the "en garde" position are susceptible to this form of knee pain. Patellar tendinitis is marked by inflammation and pain that makes proper fencing footwork difficult.



How can you prevent fencing injuries?

Get a grip

There are a number of different grips in fencing, and gripping incorrectly can cause pain and injury. Be careful not to grip too hard, particularly when the wrist is extended and held at an angle. Also, remember that different grips put different stresses on the fingers, hands and wrists. Learn new grips slowly, and be sure that you have built up sufficient strength and skill before using new grips.

Faulty footwork

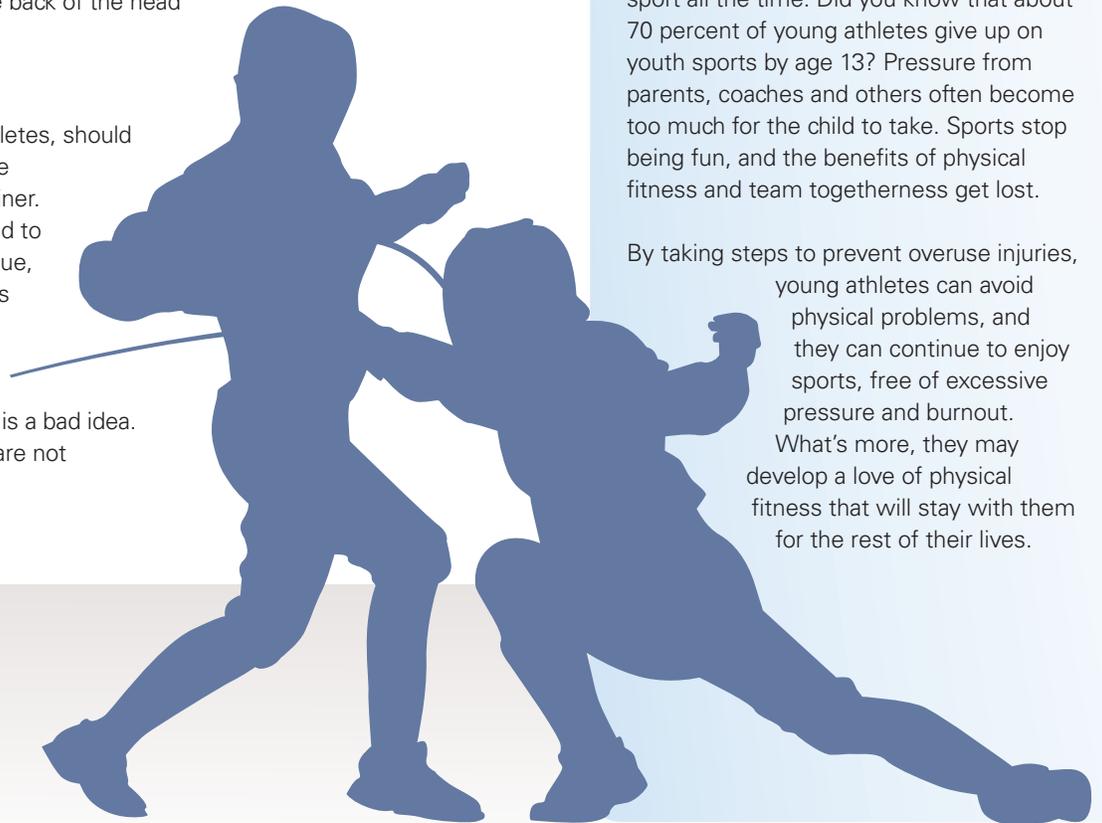
Balance and control in competitive fencing depends on good footwork. Footwork is also important for establishing position for attack and defense. What's more, good footwork can reduce the risk of injury. Coaches and trainers should work with fencers on their footwork, focusing on alignment and balance. Also, athletes should engage in core conditioning so they have the strength to maintain proper positioning.

What to wear?

High quality fencing equipment that fits the athlete properly can dramatically reduce the risk of injury. Fencers should wear fencing jackets, rated to withstand significant force, that feature a "sword catcher," or a layer of fabric at the collar to protect against blades that slide along the jacket. Other essential equipment includes a padded breastplate, underarm protectors, padded knickers, padded bib at the throat and a mask that attaches at the back of the head and the bib.

Supervision

All fencers, but particularly young athletes, should never practice or compete without the supervision of a qualified coach or trainer. Coaches and trainers should be trained to watch for warning signs, such as fatigue, complaints of pain or limping. Athletes who show these signs should be removed from activities and given treatment. Also, athletes should be taught that "playing through pain" is a bad idea. Injuries may only grow worse if they are not addressed quickly.



What are Overuse Injuries?

In many cases, overuse injuries like strains, sprains and fatigue arise because athletes specialize in one sport at an early age and play it year-round. Too much repetition of movement may cause soreness and pain. Excessive training may cause minor overuse injuries, leading to more serious, major chronic injuries.

Young fencers are advised to get plenty of rest between tournaments and practices. Take time off each week and between seasons. Also, play other sports. Just fencing may put too much strain on the muscles needed to fence. Even elite athletes cross-train. Mix up your activities with swimming, cycling, soccer... something new!

In addition, young athletes may experience emotional problems by playing the same sport all the time. Did you know that about 70 percent of young athletes give up on youth sports by age 13? Pressure from parents, coaches and others often become too much for the child to take. Sports stop being fun, and the benefits of physical fitness and team togetherness get lost.

By taking steps to prevent overuse injuries, young athletes can avoid physical problems, and they can continue to enjoy sports, free of excessive pressure and burnout. What's more, they may develop a love of physical fitness that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.



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This piece is part of an informational series on sports injury prevention produced by the Orthopedic Center/Sports Medicine Division at Boston Children's Hospital. For materials on preventing injuries in other sports, call 617-355-3501 or visit bostonchildrens.org/sportsmed.



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