

# Cheerleading safety

A parent's guide for keeping kids in the game.



With the rise in youth cheerleading participation, the number of athletes at risk for injury is also increasing. This reference guide provides information on the most common cheerleading injuries that require treatment.

## Ankle injuries

The most common injury in sports is a lateral ankle sprain, which occurs in cheerleading by rolling the ankle over the outside of the foot. A lateral ankle sprain causes damage to the ligaments just below the bone on the outside of the ankle. In some cases a “pop” is felt or heard by the athlete. Treatment varies with the severity of the injury.

- Mild sprains require rest but not necessarily medical treatment (follow the PRICE treatment plan, printed on pg. 2).
- Persistent swelling, pain, or any deformity should be seen by a physician.

## Knee injuries

A common injury in cheerleading is an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) sprain or tear, which occurs when the knee is twisted forcefully or hyperextended. Athletes often describe a “pop” at the time of injury, followed by a lot of swelling within a few hours after the injury.

Athletes should see their pediatrician or pediatric sports medicine physician if pain and/or swelling persists after PRICE treatment. In addition:

- In younger athletes, bone maturity helps to determine the treatment plan. Injury to an open growth plate requires special consideration by a pediatric orthopedic specialist.
- Core strengthening and training in proper cutting, jumping, and landing technique may help to prevent this injury.

## Knee pain that comes on slowly over time can indicate other problems, such as:

- **Patellofemoral pain syndrome** (Runner's knee) — pain in the front of the knee related to muscle and tissue stress around the knee cap; can be addressed with proper training in physical therapy.
- **Osteochondritis dissecans** — a defect in the knee's cartilage that can become evident over time during repetitive activity such as jumping.
- **Osgood-Schlatter disease** — stress-related inflammation in a growth center at the front of the knee.

## Head injuries

A concussion is a brain injury usually caused by a sudden jolt or a blow to the head or neck that disrupts normal brain function. An athlete does not need to be knocked out or have memory loss to have suffered a concussion. In fact, most athletes who suffer a sports-related concussion DO NOT lose consciousness.

## You may observe that an athlete with a concussion:

- Appears dazed or stunned
- Moves clumsily
- Is confused
- Answers questions slowly
- Has behavior or personality changes
- Exhibits unsteadiness
- Loses consciousness

## An athlete with a concussion may have:

- Headache
- Concentration or memory problems
- Nausea
- Double or fuzzy vision
- Balance problems or dizziness
- Feelings of being “in a fog”
- Sensitivity to light or noise
- Confusion

An athlete with signs of a concussion should be removed from play immediately and not allowed to return until evaluated by a doctor. Do not leave an athlete alone after a concussion.

## Call for immediate medical help if your child displays:

- A headache that gets worse, lasts for a long time, or is severe
- Confusion, extreme sleepiness, or trouble waking up
- Vomiting (more than once)
- Seizures (arms and legs jerk uncontrollably)



# Cheerleading safety (cont.)



- Trouble walking or talking
- Weak or numb arms or legs
- Any other sudden change in thinking or behavior

Most athletes with a concussion will recover completely within a few weeks of the initial injury. Returning to play before completely recovering puts the athlete at risk for a more serious injury, long-term damage, and even death.

## Back pain

Cheerleading puts a lot of demand on a young athlete's back due to repetitive maneuvers that require hyperextension of the back. Some injuries to the back occur suddenly and are commonly known as a back strain. Others occur more gradually, especially if the body doesn't have time to recover properly. Over time, repeated hyperextension of the low back can cause:

- **Spondylolysis** — a stress fracture of the bones in the lower spine, or lumbar vertebrae.
- **Spondylolisthesis** — the lumbar vertebrae slips forward, if an athlete with a stress fracture continues to participate in the sport.

## Weight management

Cheerleaders should aim to stay close to their competition weight in the off-season in order to avoid dangerous weight-cutting practices during the competitive season. Cheerleaders who desire to lose weight should not lose more than one to two pounds a week to avoid breakdown of lean body mass. Weight loss is best achieved using a combination of reducing caloric intake and increasing calories burned. Nutrition tips for good weight control include:

- Give your body energy from sources of carbohydrates, proteins, and fats. Do not omit any food groups.
- Choose whole-grain foods, lean protein, and healthy fats at meal times.
- Eat a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and fiber.
- Drink calorie-free beverages; eat fresh fruits instead of drinking fruit juices.
- Watch your portion sizes.
- Choose low-fat dairy products.
- Do not skip meals. Eat a healthy snack if hungry in between meals.
- Limit high-calorie foods with added sugar and fat.

## Bumps, bruises, twists, and muscle strains

These can affect all areas of the body. Recommended treatment is the **PRICE** formula:

- P**rotect the area with a sling or crutches, if necessary.
- R**est the injured area.
- I**ce the injury for 20 minutes at a time. Do not apply the ice directly to the skin.
- C**ompress the injured area with a wrap. Do not pull tightly, as this can cut off circulation.
- E**levate the injured area above the heart.

## SSM Health Cardinal Glennon SportsCare

SSM Health Cardinal Glennon SportsCare is the premier pediatric sports medicine provider in St. Louis and St. Charles. We provide exclusive, direct access to comprehensive medical care for young athletes.

Specialists your child has access to include adolescent medicine physicians, cardiologists, emergency medicine physicians, neurologists, nutritionists, orthopedists, pediatric psychologists, physical therapists, pulmonologists, radiologists, and rehabilitation specialists. We also keep kids in the game through educational programs and supports for parents, coaches and athletes that focus on injury prevention, proper technique and overall athletic health.

For more information about SSM Health Cardinal Glennon SportsCare or to find a specialist for your athlete, call or text us **24/7 at 314-577-5640**.

Expert care for young athletes by SSM Health Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital providers, **24 hours a day in the ER at:** SSM Health Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital, DePaul Hospital, St. Clare Hospital, St. Joseph Hospital-St. Charles, St. Joseph Hospital-Lake St. Louis, Anderson Hospital, and HSHS St. Elizabeth Hospital.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, SSM Health ministries implemented enhanced safety measures, which are evaluated periodically based on COVID-19 transmission numbers. To ensure your protection and that of others, we continue to require face masks upon entry along with ministry-specific screening processes.