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ACL injuries in young female athletes now an epidemic

Parents should demand coaches start injury-prevention programs

MAYWOOD, Ill. (April 30, 2014) – With young female athletes experiencing an epidemic of ACL knee injuries, a Loyola University Medical Center sports medicine specialist is urging parents to demand that coaches implement injury-prevention programs.

Female athletes who play basketball and soccer are two to eight times more likely to suffer an ACL injury compared with male athletes, according to the American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine.

The epidemic is getting worse as more girls and young women play sports, said orthopaedic surgeon Dr. Pietro Tonino, director of Loyola's orthopaedic Sports Medicine department. And summer is a peak time for injuries because many girls and young women are playing soccer and other sports.

"I'm tired of seeing so many girls and young women with ACL injuries in my clinic," Tonino said. "Many of these injuries could be prevented with a simple warm-up program that can be done in minutes."

Tonino said one such program is FIFA 11+, a warm-up program designed to reduce injuries among soccer players. The program should be performed as a standard warm-up at the start of each training session at least twice a week. It takes about 20 minutes.

Teams that perform FIFA 11+ at least twice a week experience 30 percent to 50 percent fewer injured players, according to FIFA, the governing body of the World Cup and other international soccer tournaments.

The anterior cruciate ligament, or ACL, is one of the four major ligaments of the knee. It connects the front of the tibia (shinbone) with the back of the femur (thighbone). It helps provide stability to the knee joint. Patients with torn ACLs often experience their knee "giving out." ACL injuries also increase the risk of arthritis.

Minor ACL tears can be treated nonsurgically. But significant ACL tears require surgery. An orthopaedic surgeon removes a tendon from the patient's knee and uses it to replace the torn ligament. Surgical instruments and techniques are improving, and ACL surgery is becoming less invasive.

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Nevertheless, the operation still requires six months of rehab, Tonino said.

Tonino has performed thousands of surgeries to repair ACL tears.

"We can get athletes back on the field or the court, and they can perform at very high levels," Tonino said. "But a reconstructed knee can never be as good as a God-given knee. So athletes, coaches and parents should do everything possible to prevent ACL injuries. Spending a few minutes on injury-prevention exercises at the beginning of practice can benefit athletes for the rest of their lives."

Tonino is a professor in the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery & Rehabilitation of Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

Loyola University Health System (LUHS) is a member of Trinity Health. Based in the western suburbs of Chicago, LUHS is a quaternary care system with a 61-acre main medical center campus, the 36-acre Gottlieb Memorial Hospital campus and more than 30 primary and specialty care facilities in Cook, Will and DuPage counties. The medical center campus is conveniently located in Maywood, 13 miles west of the Chicago Loop and 8 miles east of Oak Brook, Ill. The heart of the medical center campus is a 559-licensed-bed hospital that houses a Level 1 Trauma Center, a Burn Center and the Ronald McDonald® Children's Hospital of Loyola University Medical Center. Also on campus are the Cardinal Bernardin Cancer Center, Loyola Outpatient Center, Center for Heart & Vascular Medicine and Loyola Oral Health Center as well as the LUC Stritch School of Medicine, the LUC Marcella Niehoff School of Nursing and the Loyola Center for Fitness. Loyola's Gottlieb campus in Melrose Park includes the 255-licensed-bed community hospital, the Professional Office Building housing 150 private practice clinics, the Adult Day Care, the Gottlieb Center for Fitness, Loyola Center for Metabolic Surgery and Bariatric Care and the Loyola Cancer Care & Research at the Marjorie G. Weinberg Cancer Center at Melrose Park.

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