

Growing number of injuries gives MLB pause

By Bob Nightengale, USA TODAY

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The [Boston Red Sox](#) frantically are trying to stay alive in the [American League](#) wild-card race. But considering their historic rate of injuries these days, they have a lot more problems than finding out which players want to play for manager [Bobby Valentine](#).

Major league teams have used the disabled list 539 times this year through Aug. 13, including 118 players on the 60-day DL — a 28% increase in serious injuries from last year and 55% since 2010.

It's the highest total since [Major League Baseball](#) began keeping statistical DL data in 2002.

"It's been brutal this year," says Toronto Blue Jays President Paul Beeston, whose club in one week lost starting pitchers Drew Hutchison and [Kyle Drabek](#) to major elbow injuries and fellow starter [Brandon Morrow](#) to an abdominal injury.

"As an industry, we have to look at why this is happening."

There have been more players placed on the DL than at any time since [MLB](#) began recording the transactions at the perceived height of its steroid era in 2002, costing owners tens of millions of dollars and changing the pennant race landscape.

Commissioner Bud Selig has brought in medical experts to speak to owners and his special on-field committee, but there are no answers.

"We're all asking ourselves the same thing," said Lewis Yocum, one of the nation's leading orthopedic surgeons and the Los Angeles Angels team doctor. "You look at Toronto. You look at Kansas City (which lost four pitchers to [Tommy John](#) elbow surgery).

"Everyone is looking around asking if we're doing something wrong. I don't think it's a training or conditioning thing. It seems like we just go through cycles."

[Red Sox](#) battered, bruised

And no team has suffered more than the Red Sox.

Boston, which overhauled its medical and training staffs in the offseason, has had more injuries than any other team in baseball since at least 1987, according to STATS.

The Red Sox have had an entire roster — 25 players, including 13 All-Stars — go on the DL a total of 29 times. They've already used 48 players, one shy of their total all last year, with two weeks remaining before September call-ups.

Red Sox general manager [Ben Cherington](#) defends his new medical and training staffs and reminds critics the staff shouldn't be blamed for inheriting several players with major injuries, such as starters [John Lackey](#) and [Daisuke Matsuzaka](#), who had Tommy John surgery last year. Left fielder [Carl Crawford](#) had wrist surgery in January.

Shortstop [Will Middlebrooks](#), second baseman [Dustin Pedroia](#), closer [Andrew Bailey](#) and outfielder [Cody Ross](#) suffered their injuries on the field. Bailey, injured in spring training, was not activated until Tuesday.

"The restructuring of our medical staff has gained traction, and we are ahead of where we were last year in terms of individual preventative measures being taken," Cherington said in an e-mail to USA TODAY Sports.

"We are very focused on the prevention of soft-tissue injuries and improving our screening of players when they come into the organization so we can get ahead of any potential issues down the road.

"It's a work in progress."

The biggest concern, of course, is the rash of injuries to pitchers. The [Washington Nationals](#) are being so cautious they plan to shut down ace [Stephen Strasburg](#), who had Tommy John surgery two years ago.

"I will say that we are acutely more aware of the elbow," said Yocum, who performed the surgery on Strasburg. "In the past, a pitcher would be diagnosed with a sore elbow. Now, it's a partial tear of the ligament.

"There's more of an awareness, and the fact is that with surgery we get decent results. So front offices are more inclined to get them over with and move on."

Reds on other side of debate

No team has had more success staying healthy than the [Cincinnati Reds](#). They are the only team in the major leagues that has used only five starting pitchers, and it has had nine players go on the DL.

This is the longest stretch in 112 years the Reds have gone using their original starting rotation — and the longest streak by any team since the [Seattle Mariners](#) went the entire 2003 season using the same five starters.

The common denominator is Reds pitching coach [Bryan Price](#), the Mariners' pitching coach in 2003.

"If there was a way to create some sort of road map of success," Price said, "it would have been written well before today. We haven't done anything here that reinvented the game. We've just had different guys that have put a lot of work into it and have been fortunate. Arm injuries aren't the only thing that shelves pitchers. You've got hamstrings and and rib-cage pulls that we've been able to avoid, as well.

"It used to be rotator cuff and back problems. Now, it's Tommy John surgeries and oblique strains."

Why?

The sports medicine field and MLB surely will dig deeper to find out. For now, there are only theories.

Says Cherington: "I think players put their bodies in positions that they never did before in the name of performance. Pitchers manipulate the ball like never before: cutter, sinker, split, multiple types of fastballs. This all requires different finger pressure, different hand position at release. When this happens, it could very well change the torque on the elbow and shoulder.

"Pitchers have had to do this because hitters are so much better. They'd get killed if they weren't manipulating the baseball. But it could come with a downside — more stress on the joints.

"I have no data to support this. It's just a hunch."