

Fitness: Who to see when hurt

Right treatment by the right professionals will heal your sports-related injuries faster than relying on the Internet

By JILL BARKER, Freelance May 4, 2010 7:22 AM



Athletic therapist Graham Rynbend helps

Montreal Canadiens player Travis Moen after he was injured during a game against the Ottawa Senators at the Bell Centre on March 22.

Photograph by: John Mahoney, The Gazette

MONTREAL - Most fitness fanatics have made peace with the small aches and pains that accompany an active lifestyle. The occasional twinge in the knee or bop on the nose is small change when compared to the health problems associated with staying on the couch.

But what do you do when the pain doesn't go away? And who do you trust to provide not only the best treatment, but the kind of advice that doesn't send you back to the couch?

According to Fany Fallenbaum, a sports medicine physician at the McGill Sport Medicine Clinic, injuries that occurred during sports or prevent the return to sport are best evaluated by someone with specialized training in sports injuries.

"It used to be that only professional athletes used sports medicine doctors," Fallenbaum said. "Now it's the average exerciser who uses our services."

Within the sports medicine field there are several different specialties; orthopedic surgeons who operate on injured joints, sport medicine physicians who investigate and diagnose injuries and therapists (osteopaths, athletic therapists and physiotherapists) who treat, and sometimes diagnose, injuries.

According to Moreno Morelli, orthopedic surgeon at St. Mary's hospital, who you go see for treatment depends on your injury. Acute traumatic injuries like fractures, severe sprains and dislocations generally require medical help at the local emergency room where you will often be referred to an orthopedic specialist.

Injuries that slowly develop over time, often referred to as overuse injuries, are best treated by a sport medicine doctor or therapist. The "itis" injuries like tendonitis and bursitis fall into the category of overuse as does any kind of soft tissue or joint pain that gets worse during or after exercise.

Dave Campbell of Concordia Sports Medicine is an osteopath and athletic trainer for the Canadiens and several Olympic athletes, including freestyle skier Jen Heil. He says one of the benefits of going to an osteopath, athletic therapist or physiotherapist is that you can usually get an appointment faster than the time it takes to see a physician.

Does that mean you are better served by avoiding your family doctor in favour of someone with specialized sports medicine training?

"It depends," Moreno said. "Some G.P.'s do little more than prescribe anti-inflammatories, while others are good at referring you on."

Some people bypass a doctor altogether to be seen by an athletic therapist, osteopath or physiotherapist. All have the potential to help, but only the athletic therapist is guaranteed to be trained in the treatment of sports-related injuries. Physiotherapists and osteopaths can specialize outside of the field, so ask about their experience in dealing with athletic injuries before making an appointment.

If you are unsure of where to find the right kind of care for your bum knee or banged up shoulder, contact your local sports medicine clinic. These multidisciplinary treatment centres feature a team of sports medicine specialists including therapists, physicians and orthopedic surgeons. Many include other complementary services including sports massage, strength and conditioning specialists, and posture analysis and training.

Campbell says there's no harm in asking for someone with experience in treating your specific injury, but suggests that the staff in most sports medicine clinics are trained to deal with a whole gamut of activity-related aches and pains. That said, he warns exercisers that not all therapists or therapies are successful.

"If you've been treated five or six times and it's not helping, then you need to find someone else," Campbell said.

Fallenbaum says the benefit of a sport medicine clinic is its team approach. Physicians refer to therapists and therapists refer to physicians in an effort to ensure the best care and follow up. And since the members of the team know each other, they are good at matching patients to the right sports medicine specialist.

When is your injury worthy of a visit to the sport medicine clinic? If the pain is so severe that your everyday lifestyle and workouts are affected, then a consultation should be done as soon as possible. But for pain that has just started and isn't the result of a traumatic injury, Campbell suggests performing a little self-care first.

Scale back on exercise frequency, intensity or duration, stretch regularly and ice whatever hurts after your workout, Campbell said. If the pain abates, you're probably okay. If not, you'll need more than your own TLC. Campbell also warns to stay away from Internet-based diagnoses and the well-meaning, but often erroneous, advice of friends, family and co-workers. And just in case you're worried that you won't like what a professional has to say, it's rare that absolute rest is prescribed.

"I want to get you back (to your normal exercise routine) as soon as possible," Fallenbaum said.

Campbell agrees, though he says slight adjustments in training, technique or equipment may be necessary to ensure that the pain doesn't reoccur.

As for a final piece of advice, don't wait too long before seeking professional help. The longer an injury goes untreated, the longer it takes to heal. Listening to your body and seeking help from the right person at the right time are key to staying healthy and active.

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