

Week 2- High School Athletics and Acute Injury Management: Are Urgent Care Centers the Right Option?

Whether a point guard jams their finger at basketball practice, or a soccer player has their knee give out from beneath them during a conference championship game, any injury can present concerns for both the student-athlete and their parents. An acute injury may initially present with pain and swelling, as well as limited ability to move or put pressure on the affected area. Additional to the body's physical responses, an acute injury may provoke a variety of emotional responses including anxiety, sadness, and frustration. The psychological component, for parents and athletes alike, builds around one central question that we always wish we had the instant answer to: "*How bad is it?*"

A majority of athletic related injuries occur during after-school practices and games or on the weekends, which fall outside of most physician office hours. This is an additional obstacle during acute post-injury care at that time of the evening. The idea of better access to medical services has been one of the main forces driving the exceptional changes we have seen across health care in the past decade. Urgent care centers offer a solution to that early evening obstacle, with most clinics operating seven days a week until 7 or 8 p.m. on a walk-in basis. Typically staffed by nurse practitioners and primary care physicians, they promote medical services including orthopedic evaluation and imaging services (usually limited to x-ray) along with a variety of other health care needs. Adding to their appeal, urgent care centers also offer lower costs and less time spent in waiting rooms with each visit compared to that of the typical emergency room experience. It's no surprise then, with ease of access and decreased costs promoted, urgent care centers have grown substantially in providers and locations across the nation, an estimated 23% growth from 2014 to 2016 alone (1). For the athletic population and their families, it certainly seems like a perfect solution to seek further evaluation and receive an answer to the question, "*How bad is it?*"

Many urgent care and emergency room visits are ultimately unnecessary, and that holds exceptional truth with athletic injuries. Yes, there are scenarios where athletic injuries absolutely require immediate referral to a medical facility for higher levels of care, such as the presentation of an obvious deformity (i.e. compound bone fractures, dislocated joints, something is pointing in the wrong direction). Across the spectrum of less significant orthopedic injuries, urgent care and ER visits can result with an initial questioning, possible imaging (typically x-ray only), then a hands-on orthopedic assessment of the injured area. Potential diagnoses are discussed, and then depending on the injury, some type of orthotic or medical aid may be provided (splints, boots, crutches, etc.) to minimize further discomfort experienced. Then a plan moving forward is discussed, commonly including one of the two listed below:

1. Referral for appointment with orthopedic specialist necessary for further evaluation.

2. Rest injured area ____ weeks and then gradually return to activity. Take _____ medicine as directed until pain and swelling subsides. Follow up if condition does not improve.

Take some time off until it feels better and ease back into sports, or mark an additional appointment on your calendar (usually not within the next couple of days). The anxiety of not knowing may have lessened by now, but does that mean this is the best option of care for everyone involved?

As a certified athletic trainer with Mercy Sports Medicine, my primary responsibility is to provide medical coverage for all games and practices held at the high school I work with. Similar to the rest of our staff of athletic trainers who provide coverage at one of Mercy's various partner schools in the St. Louis area, one question always crosses my mind when encountering an injured athlete who is in clear distress: *"Does this athlete need immediate referral?"*. In this moment, it is my job as an athletic trainer to help answer that question for both the athlete and their family members. Through conversation, observation, and thorough orthopedic assessment, our athletic trainers can help diagnose the severity and nature of injury that the athlete has sustained (muscle, tendon, bone, etc.). Our athletic trainers can then discuss an appropriate care plan specific to the needs of the injured athlete and their family. If the injury is not an emergency, but warrants referral to an orthopedic or sports medicine physician, then all efforts will be made to assist in scheduling that appointment to take place in the coming days. If an ACE wrap, a set of crutches, or an arm sling are appropriate, they will be provided. If the injury is minor, a home care plan will be shared and the athletic trainer will follow up on a daily basis. By utilizing the services of athletic trainers, injured athletes can receive appropriate care more consistently, and if needed, be seen by the appropriate physicians faster (Mercy Sports Medicine physicians keep appointment times available on their clinic schedules each afternoon if any student-athlete needs to be seen)

References

1. 2016 Benchmarking Report: Headlines on Growth. (2016). Retrieved from <http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.ucaoa.org/resource/resmgr/benchmarking/2016BenchmarkReport.pdf> Urgent Care Association of America