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Weekend Doctor

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Indoors and outdoors, young athletes stay active year-round in competitive sports. For many of them, heel pain has become another part of the game.

When a child complains of heel pain, it should be diagnosed right away. It may be a warning sign of a serious foot problem.

Heel pain often occurs in children ages 6-14 as their feet grow and the heel bone develops.

As children become more active in sports, they increase their risk for growth-plate injuries and subsequent heel pain.

This is especially true at the beginning of the school year, when surgeons see an increase in middle school and high school athletes experiencing heel pain, since football and soccer are simultaneously underway.

New bone forms in an area behind the heel, known as the growth plate, and cartilage is vulnerable to severe inflammation from strain or stress.

With repeated stresses and strains from over-activity, the heel becomes painful.

Even though growth-plate trauma is the leading cause of heel pain in young people, the condition can be difficult to diagnose.

Parents should be concerned if a child has pain in the back or bottom of the heel, limps, walks on the toes, or seems to have difficulty participating in normal recreational activities.

The condition is diagnosed by a thorough examination of the child's feet and legs, and possible medical imaging tests to rule out other serious causes of heel pain, such as bursitis, tendonitis and fractures.

In most cases, mild or moderate heel pain can be treated with shoe inserts, anti-inflammatory medications, stretching, and physical therapy.

In severe cases, the foot and ankle will be immobilized in a cast. In some instances, surgery may be necessary.

Heel pain in young people often returns after treatment since the growth plate is still forming until the age of 14 or 15.

However, the risk for reoccurrence can be lowered by choosing well-constructed shoes with good support and restricting the use of spiked athletic shoes, especially on hard fields.

Young athletes should also avoid competition that exceeds their physical abilities.

If your child is experiencing heel or foot pain, call a qualified podiatrist or foot specialist for an assessment.



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