

Cheerleading Safety

Is your child doing cartwheels at the thought of being a cheerleader? It's not just a matter of standing on the sidelines looking good in a uniform. Today, it's often an athletic pursuit with a risk for injury.

A study in the journal *Pediatrics* found that U.S. injuries linked to cheerleading more than doubled from 1990 to 2002. One big reason: Cheerleading has evolved into a sport that demands great strength, agility, and gymnastic skill.

Most injuries were fairly minor, such as sprained ankles or broken wrists. But some were serious: concussions, skull fractures, even paralysis. Of 104 catastrophic injuries experienced by female high school and college athletes from 1982 to 2005, more than half were caused by cheerleading, the National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research says.

"If you look at the actual number of injuries in cheerleading, the incidence is not high compared with football, basketball, and soccer," says orthopedic surgeon Barry P. Boden, M.D., of Rockville, Md. "But if you look at the number of severe and catastrophic injuries, that is high, because they are doing dangerous stunts."

The National Federation of High Schools has embraced safety rules drawn up by the American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Administrators (AACCA). But the rules aren't always enforced, Dr. Boden says. A safe program, he adds, will include direct adult supervision, proper conditioning, skills training, and warm-up exercises. He also offers this advice:

- The coach should be certified. A three-hour lecture course, safety manual, and 90-minute exam cost \$75. For details, visit the AACCA online at <http://www.aacca.org>.
- Floor mats should be used for complex stunts. Outdoor stunts should be canceled if the ground is wet or muddy.
- Spotters should be used when cheerleaders form a pyramid. There should be one spotter for each person above shoulder level. No one should be higher than two body lengths in the air.
- No one should join in a basket toss who hasn't mastered the right skills. In this stunt, a cheerleader is thrown into the air. The airborne cheerleader should stay upright to avoid a head injury if the landing goes wrong.

Source: Boden, Barry P., M.D., orthopedic surgeon, Rockville, Md. Lead author of "Catastrophic Cheerleading Injuries," *American Journal of Sports Medicine*, 2003. Interview.

Source: Cheerleading-Related Injuries to Children 5 to 18 Years of Age: United States, 1990-2002. Brenda J. Shields et al. *Pediatrics*, January 2006, vol. 117, no. 1, pp. 122-129.

Source: Health & You/Fall 2006