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## From Spectator to Player: The Health Hazards of Soccer

*Soccer, like any sport, has an injury-risk factor, no matter if you're playing a casual game with friends or if you're an international star like David Beckham.*

By Dr. Donald Bucklin

With the World Cup in full swing, soccer fans - from aficionados to passive spectators - are uniting as they watch the closest thing we have to an international pastime.

Soccer fans are arguably the most passionate of any sport and have been known to literally kill each other over game disagreements. Health effects of spectators aside, if you're someone who enjoys playing soccer recreationally, there are many health dangers to playing the game.

But that's not to say there aren't a myriad of benefits to playing soccer.

The flow of the game, sprinting alternating with running and back to sprinting, is known as interval training. It's one of the most effective training schedules to build tremendous cardiovascular endurance. This activity also builds muscle strength and bone mass, and lowers body fat. Your coordination and balance improve when you play soccer. Beyond the physical benefits, team activities are valuable when it comes to mental health development. We would all be healthier if we spent a couple of hours a week at this game.

But there is a price.

With any sport comes the risk of injury, no matter if you're playing a pick-up game with friends or if you're David Beckham.

Injuries tend to concentrate in the lower extremities in soccer. The ankles and knees are the most susceptible joints to injury. Ankle sprains are caused by rolling your ankle and putting so much force on the ligaments that they rip. If the ligaments are torn in half, the ankle is loose and will need surgery. More commonly, there is limited damage to the ligaments and the ankle will heal with bracing, therapy and time.

Knees are a close second in injury frequency. The knee is a simple hinge joint - it will happily bend and straighten millions of times in your life, but it doesn't like rotation or twisting. Any time your foot is planted and you are hit or you fall, you are potentially tearing your meniscus. Meniscus is cartilage, like a pad between the bones. Once cartilage is torn, a flap can fold into the joint causing mischief, and you don't play on this type of injury.

Concussions are also a common injury in soccer. Soccer is the only sport that you are permitted to use your head as a bat, so, understandably, swinging with your head causes problems if it contacts any object harder than a soccer ball (like someone else's head). Concussions used to be thought of as relatively harmless, but now we know that a concussion is a brain injury. Stack up a few concussions and you may have a measurable loss in brain function.

If you play while injured long enough, you're at risk for plenty of "itis"es - tendonitis, tenosynovitis, arthritis, bursitis - the list goes on. All of these are joint problems that have inflammation as a common pathology. Many times they are the result of cumulative trauma. Unlike sprains, tendonitis and its relatives are smoldering joint disorders that seem to last forever.



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This may not be too common for recreational players, but professional soccer players deal with knee and ankle tendonitis on a daily basis.

Soccer is an exciting game, especially as we all tune in to the World Cup. Though these athletes are conditioned to their highest peak and make it look easy, there's always the risk of injury. So just remember to play responsibly - or watch the game from the safety of your own couch.

Dr. Bucklin is a medical director for the Valencia, Calif.-based U.S. HealthWorks, which has 161 centers, including 27 worksite locations, in 15 states. For more information, visit [www.ushealthworks.com](http://www.ushealthworks.com).

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