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BOOSTER SHOTS: Oddities, musings and news from the health world

Young athletes who pitch too much may risk more injuries

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With interest in youth sports growing, there's concern among parents and health professionals about how much is too much. For young baseball players, pitching more than 100 innings a year may increase their risk of injury, a study finds.

The study, in the February issue of the American Journal of Sports Medicine, followed 481 pitchers for 10 years. All the athletes were healthy, active boys from 9 to 14 years old when the study started. Researchers' questions included playing habits (what positions where played, how many innings were pitched, what kind of pitches were thrown -- curveballs, fastballs, etc.) and medical issues, such as feeling pain while pitching, having pain that caused the athlete to miss practices or games, or having pain that led to surgery.

Players who pitched more than 100 innings in at least one year were 3.5 times more likely to be injured than those who pitched less. Reseachers noted a weaker link between pitchers who also played catcher and a higher risk of injury.

Five percent of the pitchers during the study had a serious injury that caused them to have surgery or retire. Three athletes had elbow surgery, seven had shoulder surgery and 14 retired due to a throwing injury that didn't require surgery. Among the players, only 2.2% were pitching by the last year of the study, indicating that most dropped out not because of injury, but due to other factors such as losing interest in the game or not being good enough to progress.

"It is a tough balancing act for adults to give their young athletes as much opportunity as possible to develop skills and strength without exposing them to increased risk of overuse injury," said lead researcher Glenn S. Fleisig in a news release. Fleisig, with the American Sports Medicine Institute in Birmingham, Ala., added, "Based on this study, we recommend that pitchers in high school and younger pitch no more than 100 innings in competition in any calendar year. Some pitchers need to be limited even more, as no pitcher should continue to pitch when fatigued."