SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

Media contact: Jennifer Haigh
214-648-3404
email:jhaigh@mednet.swmed.edu

UT SOUTHWESTERN PEDIATRICIAN WARNS THAT SOME YOUNG ATHLETES RISK BACK INJURIES

DALLAS – May 18, 1999 – Parents of keen young gymnasts or weight lifters should be aware that their fledgling athletes could be at risk for vertebral stress fractures or a thoracic back-pain syndrome.

"Back pain in pubertal children is generally secondary to specific diagnosable conditions that are secondary to repetitive activities," said Dr. Charles Ginsburg, chairman of pediatrics at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas and holder of the Marilyn R. Corrigan Distinguished Chair in Pediatric Research.

A fracture without disc slippage – spondylolysis – often occurs in kids who participate in sports that involve hyperflexion of the spine.

A stress fracture in a vertebra, with or without displacement of the vertebra, is more common in children than serious herniated disks or tumors. Spondylolysis occurs most often during puberty and may run in families. Treatment of nonslipped stress fractures usually involves curtailment of pain-inducing activities and physical therapy to stretch hamstrings.

More severe cases should be referred to a pediatric orthopaedist, Ginsburg said. Surgery should be an option only for children with fractured vertebrae displaced at a severe angle, he said.

The intensity and duration of the pain, the age of the child, and the child's athletic activities should determine if parents seek help for their child or let the pain run its course.

(MORE)

If the adolescent athlete complains of localized aching, aggravated by forward bending, and a stress fracture is ruled out, Scheuermann's disease should be considered, Ginsburg said.

"This disorder is a common cause of pain in the chest and thoracolumbar region of the back of older children and adolescents," he said. "It's thought that this is caused by repeated flexion under stress."

Treatment involves cessation of flexion-inducing activities, abdominal- and back-strengthening exercises, and a preventive element: diligent hamstring stretching.

If the back pain persists and a developmental anomaly, such as scoliosis, is ruled out, then rare conditions such as tumors, herniated disks or diskitis–a calcification of the disk–should be considered.

###