

Avoiding mat-astrophes

We're in the home stretch of high school and college wrestling season. It's a fulfilling time for young athletes. However, the physical nature of the sport brings a risk of injuries. From head to toe and some other issues you may not think about, [Glenett Barrett](#), an orthopedics advanced practice registered nurse at OSF HealthCare, runs down what participants and their parents and coaches need to know.

- **Concussions:** These occur from hits to the head. Adults should make sure athletes are coherent and their eyes look normal. If the athlete passes out from a concussion, they should go to the hospital. Barrett says a concussion will also keep the athlete out of competition for at least two weeks.
- **Cauliflower ear:** Barrett says during competition, a blow to the ear can cause a bruise and blood build up. Blood then can't reach the ear cartilage, or the outer fleshy parts of the ear. The cartilage is starved for oxygen, and it responds by making more tissue. The ears become puffy and swollen and look like a head of cauliflower.

Symptoms of cauliflower ear include any changes in the ear's appearance, ear pain, ear bleeding, ringing in the ear, headaches, facial swelling or blurred vision. Prevention involves wearing headgear. But Barrett also says there's a six-hour window from the onset of symptoms where you need to see a provider in the emergency department.

"They take out the blood accumulation so the blood flow will come back into the ear," she explains.

- **Shoulder injuries:** Barrett says common issues include dislocated shoulders and clavicle fractures.

Dislocations, when the upper arm bone moves out of the shoulder joint, occur due to the constant body twisting on the mat. Symptoms include shoulder and arm pain, swelling, numbness, weakness and bruising. Your shoulder could also look deformed. Barrett says the athlete should leave competition immediately and be seen by a health care provider who can move the bone back into the joint and recommend aftercare.

Fractures of your clavicle (commonly known as the collarbone) can occur when wrestlers are slammed to the mat.

"That injury also will take a person out of their meet, but it's usually non-surgical," Barrett says. "We just have to immobilize them or keep them from using their arm for six to 12 weeks."

- **Knee injuries:** A common injury is prepatellar bursitis, which can occur as the knees pound into the mat.

"There's a bursa, which is a fluid-filled sac that covers the patella [the kneecap] to give it a cushion for the other tissues to slide over," Barrett says. "It gets very angry when [hits to the mat] happen over and over. It becomes inflamed. Extra fluid will build up. It gets pretty painful."

Treatment involves taking anti-inflammatory medication like Aleve, Advil or ibuprofen. The person should rest and can ice the knee. Sometimes, a provider will perform a steroid injection to reduce inflammation and pain. Prevention includes wearing kneepads and competing on a good quality mat.

- **Ankle injuries:** Ligament strains can happen throughout the body, but Barrett says she often sees them on ankles. The ligaments stretch and become inflamed, and the ankle can become swollen. Barrett says these injuries typically heal on their own with rest over time. Ankle strain prevention involves practicing good movements on the mat.

Ankles can also suffer a dislocation or bone fracture. Barrett says dislocations should be treated in the emergency department. Fractures may require surgery, where a doctor will use screws and plates to stabilize the ankle. The person usually goes home the same day and should rest for six to eight weeks.

- Skin infections: Wrestling mats are often dirty, and wrestlers can pass fluids between each other, leading to infections. Barrett says a common infection is methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA. Athletes should check their skin often for rashes or sores that aren't healing. They should also take frequent showers.

"That sounds like a no brainer for adults. But a kid has other things to do besides shower after their meet," Barrett points out. "Their minds are in a different way."

In other words, they may be thinking about the next social event or homework, not their health.

Bottom line advice

Barrett says the best prevention for these injuries is good training. Practice good body mechanics. Use quality equipment.

Adults should also recognize when their child is injured or not acting right and see a provider right away. Don't shrug off complaints of pain. Young people should also be empowered to speak up about injuries. Early treatment is the best chance of preventing serious complications.

"If you have a suspicion, bring them in," Barrett says.

Learn more

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