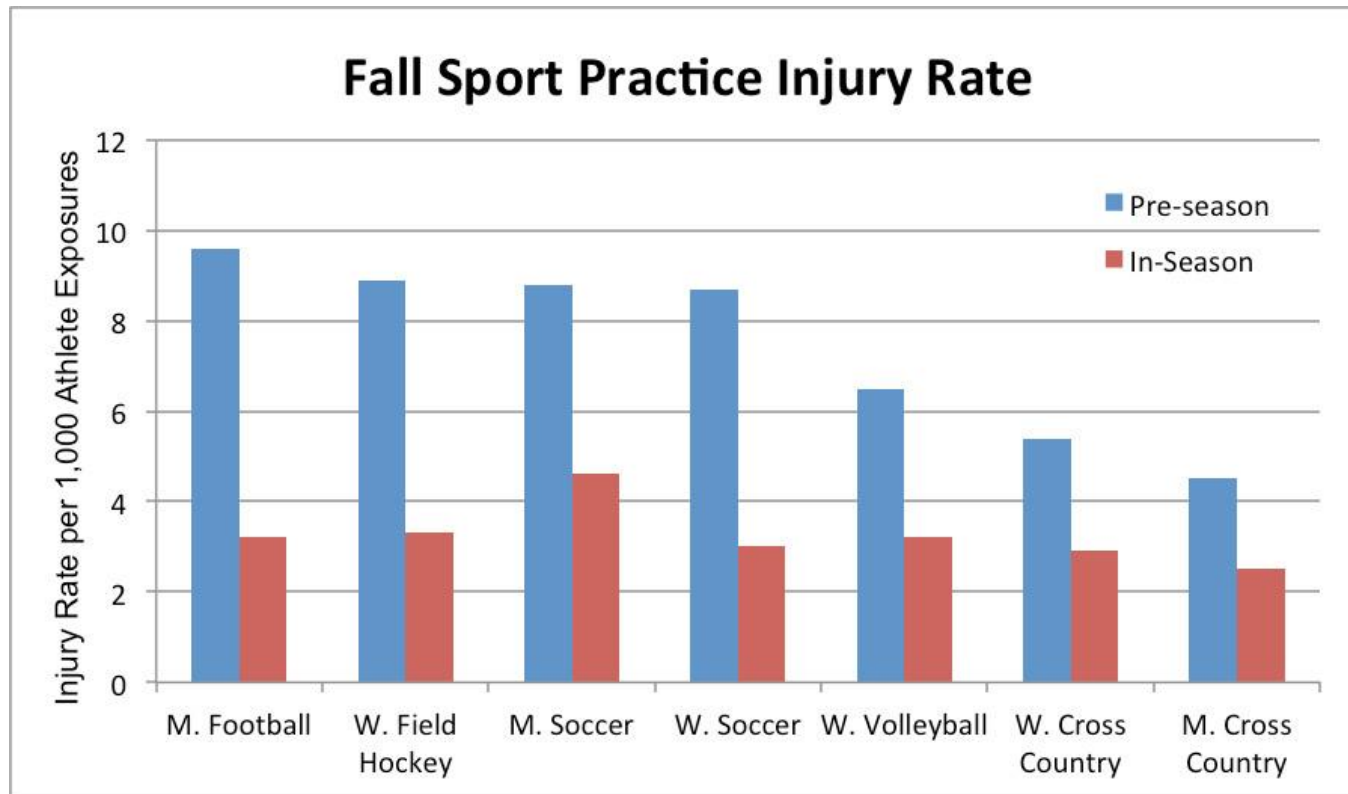


# Best practices developed to address heat illness in fall sports

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As the NCAA's football programs prepare for the fall season, all will follow a strict road map to guide them past the potential hazards that can accompany premature exposures to intense exercise under the hot summer sun.

NCAA policies lay down specific regulations for acclimatizing football players to the rigors of preseason conditioning. This includes regulating the number of on-field practices each day, the length of those sessions, at which points of the preseason certain pieces of equipment can be worn, and even the frequency of multiple-practice days. The policies are designed to protect the student-athlete's

health and avoid exposure to a rapid acceleration of activity before their body's physical conditioning is ready to handle the load. The risk of sudden death is highest when athletes begin any new practice period, especially within the first few days. And sport injuries can be three times higher during the preseason than in the regular-season practice periods. Conditioning sessions are also a higher risk activity than the normal sport drills and skills sessions.

Other fall sports face similar challenges when starting up following the summer period, though they do not have specific practice policies to guide them. They must design appropriate practice plans that address heat, hydration, conditioning and rest periods that balance the needs for protecting the health of their student-athletes while at the same time preparing them for competition.

As institutions search for the best approaches, the NCAA Committee on Competitive Safeguards and Medical Aspects of Sports developed these practices that should be followed to develop an effective preseason conditioning strategy:

- **Develop a preseason practice plan:** Athletes cannot be conditioned into shape over a two-week period. It takes much more time to reach competitive-level condition. Coaches and student-athletes should anticipate a period of six to eight weeks for preseason preparation, during which the type, frequency and intensity of exercises is progressively increased and ample recovery time is provided. As part of this preparation, student-athletes should be encouraged to prepare for preseason activities independently with a progressive strength and conditioning plan at least four weeks before the start of the preseason period. This will prepare their bodies for the increased activity in practices, which coaches often conduct at contest-level intensity.
- **Start slow:** During the first three days of preseason workouts, practices should be limited to one session per day that lasts no more than two hours. This will give student-athletes enough time to steadily build up their endurance without the risks of overtraining. Freshmen, transfers and walk-on student-athletes may need additional time to acclimate to the rigors of collegiate sports, so extending this period to six or seven days would be appropriate to consider. This can also apply to any athlete returning from an injury or illness and those beginning after a school break period.
- **Limit daily practice sessions:** After the initial acclimatization period, limit practice sessions to no more than two per day and avoid scheduling multiple practice sessions on consecutive days. Instead, schedule multiple practice sessions every other day, with a single workout in between, until the academic year begins. Each practice should last no more than two hours.
- **Plan for a heat acclimatization period:** Student-athletes should gradually increase exposure to hot, humid summer weather for a minimum of 10 to 14 days at the beginning of preseason activities. Similar to the preseason conditioning plan, activity during each exposure to heat should gradually increase in intensity and duration until the exercise is comparable to the exposure likely to be experienced in competition. During periods of intense heat, practice times should be reduced and scheduled during cooler times of the day.
- **Phase in exertional activity.** Coaches should consider allowing student-athletes to become accustomed to heat and exercise intensity before conducting highly exertional activities such as timed runs, max lifting sessions, repeat sprints or competitive running. An example of a progressive training plan is to start at 50 percent of total workload and intensity, and then move up incrementally over a set number of days. Workout sessions should not be used for punishment or disciplining behavior,

academic or athletic performance.

- **Take time off between practices:** On days when multiple practice sessions are held, provide at least three hours of continuous recovery time between the end of the first practice and the start of the next. During that time, student-athletes should not attend meetings or engage in physical activities related to their sport. However, time spent receiving medical treatment or eating meals can be included as part of the recovery period.
- **Walk-through after a break:** Walk-through sessions can be used as a teaching opportunity during the preseason to supplement the physical practice sessions, but just like multiple-practice days, student-athletes should also be given a rest period of at least three hours between practice and the walk-through. During the walk-through, student-athletes should not use equipment related to the sport or perform conditioning exercises.
- **Take a day off:** Student-athletes should not participate in practice sessions for more than six consecutive days. This includes any organized physical activity related to the sport, such as warm-ups, stretching, scrimmaging, weight lifting, fitness testing, conditioning, yoga, pilates, cool downs, non-medically related rehabilitation or captain's practices.
- **Communicate:** Encourage coaches to get involved with medical staff in the development of a conditioning plan. All personnel should be aware of the potential impact acclimatization, hydration, medications and drugs, existing medical conditions, nutritional supplements, clothing and equipment have on student-athletes' health while participating in strenuous workouts. When determining if a student-athlete is ready to return to competitive activities following an injury or illness, there should be a joint evaluation between the sports medicine staff and the strength and conditioning staff when making a judgment on the best return-to-play model for each individual.
- **Have an emergency plan on file:** On-field personnel should review, practice and follow their venue emergency plan and be trained in administering first aid, cardiopulmonary resuscitation and automated external defibrillator use.

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