SKIN IN THE GAME: DERMATOLOGIC ISSUES AMONG ATHLETES
Dermatologist offers tips for preventing and treating common conditions

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OVERVIEW:
Every sport is different, and every athlete has unique needs. No matter their game, though, athletes across the board are prone to five dermatologic issues: blisters, turf burns, athlete’s foot, acne mechanica and exposure to ultraviolet (UV) light. Fortunately, there are ways to prevent these problems and treat them when they occur.

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Information provided by board-certified dermatologist Brian B. Adams, MD, MPH, FAAD, professor and Drs. Mutasim, Gloster, Jr. & Claassen Endowed Chair of Dermatology, University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, and director of sports dermatology and chief of dermatology, Cincinnati VA Medical Center.

BLISTERS
According to Dr. Adams, three ingredients create “the perfect recipe” for a blister: heat, moisture, and friction between the skin and a fixed object. Athletes who use handheld equipment, like tennis racquets, or those who spend a lot of time running or making frequent stops and starts experience the type of friction that creates a blister. Getting hot and sweaty during practices and games makes blisters more likely to occur as well.

Dr. Adams says the best way to prevent blisters is to put distance between the skin and the object causing friction. He recommends that athletes wear synthetic, moisture-wicking socks, which not only provide a barrier against friction but also keep the skin cool and dry. Those who feel a “hot spot” where a blister is starting to form can attempt to stop it by wearing an extra pair of socks, or applying petroleum jelly or an over-the-counter blister prevention treatment. Athletes also may want to utilize a shoe-lacing technique that reduces the likelihood of blisters by redistributing pressure on the foot and ankle.

When athletes do get a blister, they may feel the urge to remove the skin in order to get the fluid out, but Dr. Adams advises against this. Instead, he recommends draining through one small point and keeping the rest of the blister as intact as possible, since the skin provides good natural protection to promote healing. It’s important to keep the blister clean, he says, and athletes also may want to apply petroleum jelly. If a blister shows any sign of infection — warmth, redness, or getting better and then getting worse — consult a board-certified dermatologist.

TURF BURNS
Abrasions caused by falls against an artificial surface, also known as turf burns, have become more prevalent among athletes as the use of artificial turf has increased, Dr. Adams says. These injuries put athletes at risk for infection, which could end up spreading to multiple team members.
Dr. Adams says the best way to fight turf burns is to stop them before they occur by wearing additional padding. Those who do sustain a turf burn should clean it carefully, treat it with a friction-reducing substance like petroleum jelly and cover it with an adhesive dressing — and consult a board-certified dermatologist if the injury shows any sign of infection.

ATHLETE’S FOOT
The fungal infection known as athlete’s foot is common among athletes, as its name implies, because the warm, dark, moist environment inside an athletic shoe is the perfect environment for fungus to grow. Athletes can prevent this condition by wearing synthetic, moisture-wicking socks, which keep the feet cool and dry, and by wearing sandals in community locker rooms and showers, which prevents the spread of fungal infection. Dr. Adams says those prone to athlete’s foot also may use antifungal cream as a preventive measure.

Some athletes may mistake another condition, like atopic dermatitis, for athlete’s foot, Dr. Adams says, while others may think they simply have dry skin on their feet when in fact they have athlete’s foot. A board-certified dermatologist can provide a diagnosis and recommend an appropriate treatment for any skin problem that’s not getting better.

ACNE MECHANICA
Acne mechanica is a type of acne caused by heat, moisture, friction and clogged pores. According to Dr. Adams, athletes often get this condition in areas where equipment, such as a helmet or pads, covers the skin and rubs against it for an extended period of time, during which the skin also gets hot and sweaty. Athletes can prevent this condition by placing a barrier between the skin and the equipment. Once acne mechanica appears, however, it’s best to see a board-certified dermatologist, as the condition can be tough to treat.

UV EXPOSURE
Athletes are exposed to the sun’s UV rays during outdoor practices and games, Dr. Adams says, and those who start young may receive excessive exposure over an extended period of time. Winter athletes are exposed to UV rays reflecting off snow, while those who participate in aquatic sports are exposed to both rays that reflect off the water and rays that converge in the water. Plus, a study conducted in 2000 found that sweat on the skin increases one’s risk of sunburn, which means that UV exposure may be especially dangerous for active outdoor athletes.

Dr. Adams reminds athletes that they are at risk from UV exposure any time they’re outside, even on cloudy days, so they should always be diligent about sun safety. To protect themselves, outdoor athletes should use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with a Sun Protection Factor of 30 or higher, and remember to apply it to their ears and the part in their hair. Those who are outside for a prolonged period of time should reapply their sunscreen at least every two hours. Athletes who sustain sunburns can soothe them with aloe vera, but Dr. Adams recommends that those who have received excessive UV exposure visit a board-certified dermatologist for regular skin exams.

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“Athletes who are aware of these five common issues can take action to prevent the vast majority of dermatologic problems they may encounter,” Dr. Adams says. “And if they do encounter any of these problems, a board-certified dermatologist can help treat them.”

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