

Avoid Pitching Injuries – What NOT to Do

by Gerald Warner, Softball Pitching Instructor



Softball pitchers...even those with years of experience... often develop (or were even taught) incorrect pitching mechanics. Some can become successful. However, the majority don't reach their maximum potential, and a large percentage end up with short-term, or even career-ending, pitching injuries.

OUR TOP 10 INJURY-CAUSING PITCHING PROBLEMS

If you are doing any of these things, find a way to stop it

1) OVERUSE – A significant percentage of softball pitching injuries are shoulder and rotator cuff problems caused by too much pitching, often by using incorrect pitching mechanics. Although there is no single recommendation on the number of pitches, innings pitched, or rest between pitching appearances that can apply to all ages and sizes of pitchers, some restraint is advised. A pitcher who repeats the same pitch over and over, such as the rollover drop ball, faces a potential overuse injury.

2) INSUFFICIENT STRETCHING AND WARM-UP – Many athletes tend to rush through pre-practice or pre-game preparation. Most serious pitchers need a minimum of 20 to 30 minutes of JOGGING, STRETCHING, SOFT OVERHAND THROWING, and FULL DISTANCE OVERHAND THROWING before they throw their first underhand pitch. Never stretch a tight muscle. A 3 to 5-minute jog will loosen muscles before you start stretch. Stretch for 5 to 10 minutes. Pay attention to hamstrings, core muscles with twist cross-body stretches, shoulders, arm rotation, and wrist movement.

3) BENDING AT THE WAIST – We see far too many young pitchers...and even some experienced ones...who bend at the waist during the final portion of their pitching motion. Bending is okay during the drive off the pitching rubber. However, at the release of the pitch, bending forward causes a slower pitch and often can lead to back injuries. In still-frame video analysis, we often see some pitchers bending forward (a right-hander bends toward 3rd base...a left toward 1st) as they are in the “open” position halfway through their arm rotation. This can be even more injury producing because it puts a severe 2-way torque on the pitcher's back.

4) “SNAPPING” THE RELEASE – Often very young pitchers get into the habit of stopping their arm motion as soon as the ball leaves their hand. Although a snap release can be used on occasion on some advanced pitches, it should never be a common practice on your most-used pitch...either a fastball or drop ball. Continued snapping without a natural follow-through can lead to elbow and forearm injuries. A good follow-through on most pitches will allow the arm to relax and bend immediately after the release, then follow up naturally to at least waist high...and some pitchers' follow through can continue until the hand approaches the shoulder.

5) “CHICKEN-WINGING” – We often refer to a pitcher's elbow that flies out during the pitching motion as a “chicken wing”. Since this is not a natural part of a pitch release or follow-through, it can often lead to elbow and shoulder problems...as well as cause a problem with pitch control. Pitchers who use the rollover/snapover method for their drop ball will often “chicken wing” at the release, and sometimes involve a twisting of the arm all the way up to the shoulder. To impart a tight spin (and avoid injury) with the rollover drop, use only the forearm and wrist to snap the ball. If necessary, lock your elbow against your side at the release to avoid using the upper arm and shoulder.

6) PRACTICING BREAKING PITCHES BEFORE YOU ARE READY – Pre-teen pitchers are often encouraged to start work on drop balls, curve balls, etc. even though their bone structure and dexterity aren't ready yet. Breaking pitches typically require a hard, tight wrist snap to impart a fast spin on the ball. Most 10, 11, and 12-year old pitchers...and even many who are older...are not yet sufficiently physically developed to work on pitches that require a hard snap of the wrist. Don't be tempted to do too much too soon! Most young pitchers who brag about their curve, screw, or even rise ball don't throw those pitches effectively.

7) PITCHING FROM THE "OPEN" POSITION – Some pitchers are taught to "keep your body open (sideways to the catcher) when you release the ball". Unfortunately, many who are taught with this method develop a problem of bending at the waist (right-hander bends toward 3rd base) during the final downswing and through the release of the pitch. Needless to say, this additional torque can put severe pressure on the pitcher's back and often results in lower back injuries.

8) IMPROPER LANDING OF THE STRIDE FOOT – Since the majority of female fastpitch pitchers use the "leap and drag" style of pitching, it is important that the stride leg drives out fast and far. Ideally, the knee will be slightly bent at landing and the stride foot will land at an angle of between 20 and 30 degrees. If the pitcher's foot is pointing more directly toward the catcher, it can cause the bent knee to "buckle" and lead to injury. If the foot lands at more of an angle...more than 45 degrees, it is too far sideways, and the "blocking" or pushback against the landing foot can cause an ankle, calf, and/or knee problem.

9) "JERKING" THE SHOULDERS OR HEAD BACK AT THE RELEASE OF THE PITCH – Although rare, some pitchers can develop a body "jerk" as they whip their arm down through the release point. Although this "arm whip" is essential for maximizing the speed of the pitch, it should not involve any snapping of the upper back, neck, or head. Some pitchers who have developed this "jerk" motion suffered back or neck injuries. Those who haven't corrected the problem are facing a similar risk.

10) DOING THINGS THE WAY A MAN PITCHER DOES IT – We have mentioned several times on our www.pitchsoftball.com website that a majority of fastpitch softball pitching instructors are men. Unfortunately, there is a tendency by many male instructors to tell girl softball pitchers to "do it the way I do it" regardless of the girl's age, size, physical and emotional development, athletic ability, etc. The way a 220-lb, 6-foot tall man throws a pitch doesn't apply to a 10-year old girl, and isn't even necessarily right for a 120-lb. teenage girl pitcher. There are alternate ways of throwing a change-up, drop ball, curve ball, etc. that need to be adjusted to the needs and comfort-level of the pitcher.

Pitching should be a rewarding, and as much as possible, an injury-free experience. If you are doing anything that has caused, or could eventually lead to, injuries, NOW is the time to correct it. Don't let a bad habit or improper mechanics hurt your game.

Article by Gerald Warner of PitchSoftball.com. Website: www.pitchsoftball.com