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News

THE PITCH: WAIT FOR CURVE BALLS

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As baseball pitchers mature, their arm injuries can be more severe, graduating from "Little League elbow" to career-threatening ligament damage.

When pre-pubescent children pitch, they have open growth plates, and the cartilage and bone inside the elbow joint can be over- stressed. That causes what is commonly known as Little League elbow.

Adults need to monitor the number of pitches, what kind of pitches are thrown and a pitcher's mechanics, especially when they're young, says Dr. Len Remia of the Cleveland Clinic in Weston. Because there's only one remedy for those sore arms.

"Immediate shutdown," Remia says. "And that's difficult down here, because you can play baseball year-round."

Upon maturing, older pitchers face the more severe ulnar collateral ligament damage, which means reconstructive surgery, often a year of rest -- and then months of holding your breath to see if it worked.

Through medical advancements, the procedure has become more routine than it was 30 years ago when it saved the career of Major League pitcher Tommy John: 11 members of the Florida Marlins' pitching staff, including ace A.J. Burnett, have had the surgery in the past three years.

"It's almost like a rite of passage," says Remia, who studied under "Tommy John" surgery creator Dr. Frank Jobe. "But it shouldn't be as necessary with young [amateur] pitchers as it is."

He, and others, blame young pitchers' reliance on curve balls and sliders, which cause an unnatural twist of the arm. The American Sports Medicine Institute in Birmingham, Ala., studied 476 pitchers ages 9 to 14 during one season and says the curveball increased shoulder pain risk by 52 percent; the slider increased elbow pain 86 percent.

Some doctors have a general rule on pitchers' maturation: If you're not shaving, you're probably too physically immature to throw a curve ball, they say.

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