Common Surfing Injuries

There are a number of surfing injuries that can persist for a long time if never treated properly. Most occur randomly or as a result of poor technique or de-conditioning, however many pain problems relating to your surfing can be prevented with the right exercises and treatment. Below are a few of the more common injuries relating to surfing:

**Shoulder Impingement**
This painful and annoying problem can occur as a result of poor thoracic spine extensibility (flexibility in the upper back) as well as overactivity in the muscles at the front of the chest. If you have overly strong pectoral muscles at the front of your chest, and your shoulder muscles at the back aren't able to cope with that muscle torque, then whenever you move to lift your arm (paddling, lifting, driving) the ball-and-socket joint of the shoulder may not be centred properly, resulting in a momentarily sharp, jabbing, pain in the shoulder. This problem can linger for some time and needs to be addressed with physiotherapist directed stretches as well as mobilisations and exercises to correct the muscle imbalance around the shoulder.

**Medial Collateral Knee Ligament Strains**
The Medial Collateral ligament, or MCL, is a commonly injured ligament during high impact surfing manoeuvres. It is located on the inner aspect of your knee. It is a commonly injured ligament because it is placed under very high loads during common basic manoeuvres. When taking a large drop or coming down from a large floater, this ligament is put under an enormous load, and can partially tear or fully tear the MCL fibres. Any grade of MCL tear will benefit greatly from a number of key techniques and exercises that help repair the ligament. Physiotherapy will also help prevent de-conditioning within the lower limb, which can further slow down your return to the water.

**Facet Joint Compression**
The facet joints or apophyseal joints are located at the back of the spinal column. These joints normally allow for smooth rotation of the spine by gliding on the facet joint of the vertebrae above. Facet joints are put under load when the back is arched or side-flexed. They can be injured from repetitive movements of the spine into the above directions under high load, or at a very fast pace. An example of this would be when you are doing a powerful hack or landing reverse. The joints will tend to load up at a certain spinal level, as one facet joint will generally take more load than the rest, due to different areas of the spine having altered amounts of flexibility. The lumbar spine (lower back) is the most common part of the spine to experience compression of the facet joints. This is a condition that benefits greatly from ‘hands on’ physiotherapy treatment targeting the particular joint/s affected.

**Neck Pain**
Cervical spine pain can be the result of many different reasons but is most commonly caused by an inadequate balance in the postural muscles around the neck and shoulders, which results in abnormal pressure on joints in the neck. As surfing normally requires a lot of endurance in the upper back, neck and shoulder muscles, increased size and strength in these muscles occurs. The resultant imbalance with associated weakness of the frontal neck muscles can cause stress on the joints within the upper cervical spine. Because of the abnormal pull on the neck, certain joints can be put under greater load than others and as a result, pain can occur. Stretching, strengthening and mobilisations of the cervical spine are an effective way of treating this type of neck condition.
Ankle Pain
Surfing places a large amount of load on the ankle and can occasionally result in strains of the individual joints of the ankle. The most common type of ankle pain results from hyper-dorsiflexion of the ankle (compression of the toes up towards the shin). This movement of the joint can occur from a barrel shutting down on you or from taking a large drop and inadequately absorbing the forces through your larger muscles around the leg. To prevent this type of injury you need to address the impairments in strength in the large muscles around the hip and knee, so that the ankle doesn’t have to absorb so much force. Physiotherapy is very important in the treatment of this type of ankle pain, as it can occur again if the ankle’s normal range of motion is not regained.

For any advice, treatment or other questions relating to your unresolved surfing injuries contact Back to Health Physiotherapy in Newport or Balgowlah. The team of Physio’s at Back to Health have a great amount of experience in diagnosing and treating all surfing-related injuries.

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