

Health Benefits & Risks in the Young Judo Athlete

USA Judo Sports Medicine Subcommittee

Robert S. Nishime, M.D.

The goal of USA Judo Sports Medicine is to promote and facilitate a healthy athletic lifestyle through safe judo participation. The health and safety of judo participants should always remain the number priority when advising or caring for our athletes.

History and Philosophy

Judo is one of the most participated sports worldwide, with practitioners spanning all age groups, gender lines, and ethnicities. Judo was originally derived from a truly “combat” oriented martial art known as jujitsu. Jujitsu was basically developed in medieval feudal Japan for battlefield ‘hand-to-hand/sword’ confrontations when a Samurai warrior lost his sword during combat. Therefore jujitsu became by necessity, a “dangerous” form of combat for survival and an adjunctive tool for victory during war.

However, through the founder of judo, Professor Jigoro Kano, jujitsu made a profound transition from a dangerous, primarily combative art form. Professor Kano modified various styles of jujitsu into a “safe”, life enhancing martial art, which he called Judo or the “gentle way”, that is now an Olympic sport. He accomplished this in part by removing many of the striking, kicking, gouging, and joint locking techniques that were primarily intended to maim or injure an opponent. He retained and created techniques that could be practiced relatively safely and harmoniously between practitioners. He placed much emphasis on achieving “mutual benefit” when individuals train together. Professor Kano redirected the primary goals of training in his martial art from self-defense and survival to the development of mind, body, and character.

The Sport of Judo

Judo is technically a “contact-collision” sport similar to folk-style & Olympic wrestling, as well as football and hockey. These other sports have significant junior leagues across the U.S. Because judo is in essence a grappling sport (throws/takedowns & pins, with the addition of chokes & am-locks much of which is restricted or limited in the junior divisions), the injury profile and injury incidence in youth judo players is likely to be similar to amateur, interscholastic junior & high school wrestling. Junior wrestling has widespread participation across the country and has traditionally been viewed as a sport, with only minor considerable and acceptable health risks.

Since there is very limited medical studies looking at the judo injury patterns & statistics in the pediatric and adolescent participants, the USA Judo Sports Medicine Subcommittee is currently conducting research to further understand the true incidence of judo injuries and problems in this demographic. We are also evaluating the validity and efficacy of current treatment recommendations and methods to enhance physical performance for this age group.

The Sports Medicine Perspective

There is an unofficial consensus worldwide among many experienced judo practitioners and medical professionals familiar with judo athletes that this sport is a healthy, safe endeavor. Much of the anecdotal evidence and expert opinions consider judo to be a positive mean towards achieving comprehensive wellness and an enhanced lifestyle. The existing current research does acknowledge that competitive judo play in adults has a relatively high incidence of injuries (similar to other contact-collision sports at this level) when compared to non-collision or non-contact sports such as baseball, soccer, swimming, etc. However, this rate of injury does not appear to be equally proportional at the youth levels. In general, the injury rates for most sports appear to decrease significantly as age at participation decreases, and I believe this is also true for judo based on my professional experience. In fact judo may be different from other sports in that it has a unique approach towards safe participation.

The first thing a beginner learns in judo class is how to safely take falls to protect one-self. Before you learn how to throw someone, you have to know how to get thrown without getting hurt. This knowledge can also be applied to other sports and potentially other precarious life situations. I believe that there are many positive physical, mental, emotional, and psychological benefits to be attained through judo practice.

The Other Benefits

Other important practical life judo lessons include learning respect for others, cooperation, and efficiency. These lessons can truly benefit the developing, immature mind and body. Judo can be a vehicle towards greater, overall life-long health & well-being, character & confidence development, and may decrease significant injuries by improving strength, flexibility, coordination, body spatial awareness, and balance.

To note one major problem that medical/pediatric professionals today encounter is the current prevalence of obesity in our country, which is now being recognized more and more in our children & adolescents. Most experienced “judo-ists” will confirm that there is nothing like a good judo workout to facilitate weight loss. It is both aerobic and anaerobic, like lifting weights and running at the same time, which has tremendous benefits for “burning” calories. I believe instilling these lessons and values into our children will have positive effects that can impact their health and well-being throughout their lifespan.

Specifically, judo is an inherently, physically dynamic sport and thus it can potentially improve one’s strength, speed, agility, conditioning, flexibility, balance, and coordination. Because of the uniqueness of judo’s various techniques, the extent of this health benefit may be sport-specific to judo. Thus participation should theoretically translate into a healthier, stronger, more resilient future body. On a related note, not only are we trying to understand the true injury patterns in judo practitioners in the U.S., but also whether or not having a background in judo as a youngster positively impacts the injury rates during participation in other sports later in life. Hopefully we’ll have the answer soon. In the meantime, I can only attest that judo has enriched many lives of those who practice this art & sport diligently, and the health benefits in my opinion outweigh the potential risks especially at the youth levels.

Judo Maxims

The original philosophies proposed by Professor Jigoro Kano emphasize the true goals and spirit of USA Judo Sports Medicine. These basic judo maxims are “maximum efficiency for expended effort” and “mutual welfare and benefit for all”.

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