

Why Ankle and Knee Braces are Evil

Okay, before I go any further let me first say that I really don't think ankle and knee braces are evil. I actually think they are a valuable tool in helping get people back to doing what they love and keeping them healthy. But who is going to read a blog called 'ankle and knee braces are good in some situations but not the best in other situations'? ☺

What has started me on this rant is seeing an athlete coming back from injury being sold a brace and given the impression that it is all they'll ever need. Even more bothersome is when I see studies like the one in a recent issue of *Foot & Ankle International*, that indicate healthy female volleyball players should wear rigid or semi-rigid ankle braces in order to prevent ankle injuries.

To the general population (and shockingly, even some health professionals!), it seems like a perfectly valid recommendation as witnessed by the amount of media coverage the study was getting. After all, braces do help get injured people back in the game and shouldn't we do anything to keep kids from getting injured? Why, to suggest anything different is the true evil!

My issue is that lost in the conversation is mention of how important strengthening and stretching is to recovery and injury prevention for any joint in the body. Giving a kid a brace and saying 'get back in the game' without proper attention to strengthening, only means that they are in for a world of hurt at some point down the road. The good brace suppliers and practitioners provide the product as *part* of the rehab program, but there are those who present it as a cure-all and that is just WRONG.

Without proper strengthening and stretching, the healthy or recovering athlete relies increasingly on the brace to the point where they need it for almost any activity. Obviously, as the CEO of a company that has a foot and ankle-strengthening device I have a conflict of interest, but I also have a wealth of personal experience.

Back when I was a competitive athlete, I tore ligaments and tendons in my right knee three times due to collisions in contact sports. Finally, I broke down and got a knee brace and it was **great**. I could plant, turn and move laterally with confidence and I felt strong for the first time in years. I loved my brace so much, I started wearing it for even less strenuous activities and never giving much thought to any strengthening exercises because 'I had a brace'. Naïve? Yes. Kind of stupid? You bet. Uncommon? Not at all – I was one of dozens in my circle of friends/competitors doing the same thing.

Fast forward 18 years and a few braces later, I was 35 years old walking up the stairs and my knee gives out. Not running up the stairs, not bounding, but walking. I decided at that moment to start strengthening my knee and slowly wean myself off the brace. Today, I am 'brace free' and have a maintenance program I follow to stay

that way. That said, if I get re-injured and to return to activity I have to wear a brace, I would because there are some great ones on the market – but it will only be part of my recovery.

The point I hope to leave you with is that while braces can be an integral part of any rehab or injury prevention program, it is imperative that we also include education on strengthening, stretching, adequate recovery, and proper movement as part of the program. For our part, the AFX team will continue to support research in this area and participate in dialogue about how we can all work together to ensure athletes recover from injuries and stay injury free.

~ Matt Ferguson, CEO, Foot Fanatic (but not in that creepy sort of way), & Oft-injured Weekend Warrior