

Girls' Most Dangerous Sport: Cheerleading

By LiveScience Staff

posted: 11 August 2008 05:14 pm ET

For high school girls and college women, cheerleading is far more dangerous than any other sport, according to a new report that adds several previously unreported cases of serious injuries to a growing list.

High school cheerleading accounted for 65.1 percent of all catastrophic [sports injuries](#) among high school females over the past 25 years, according to an annual report released Monday by the National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research.

The new estimate is up from 55 percent in last year's study. The researchers say the true number of cheerleading [injuries](#) appears to be higher than they had previously thought. And these are not ankle sprains. The report counts fatal, disabling and serious injuries.

The statistics are equally grim in college, where cheerleading accounted for 66.7 percent of all female sports catastrophic injuries, compared to the past estimate of 59.4 percent.

The revised picture results from a new partnership between the sports injury center and the National Cheer Safety Foundation, a California-based not-for-profit body created to promote safety in cheerleading and collect data on injuries. The foundation provided the center with previously unreported data. The new data added 30 injury records from high schoolers and college students to the 112 in last year's report.

Catastrophic injuries to female athletes have increased over the years, since the first report was published in 1982.

"A major factor in this increase has been the change in cheerleading activity, which now involves [gymnastic-type stunts](#)," said Dr. Frederick O. Mueller, lead researcher on the new report and a professor of exercise and sports science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "If these cheerleading activities are not taught by a competent coach and keep increasing in difficulty, catastrophic injuries will continue to be a part of cheerleading."

Less than catastrophic injuries are vastly more common and they occur at much younger ages, too. Children ages 5 to 18 admitted to hospitals for cheerleading injuries in the United

States jumped from 10,900 in 1990 to 22,900 in 2002, according to research published in the journal *Pediatrics* in 2006. The breakdown:

- Strains/sprains: 52.4 percent
- Soft tissue injuries: 18.4 percent
- Fractures/dislocations: 16.4 percent
- Lacerations/avulsions: 3.8 percent
- Concussions/closed head injuries: 3.5 percent
- Other: 5.5 percent

The new report released Monday found that between 1982 and 2007, there were 103 fatal, disabling or serious injuries recorded among female high school athletes, with the vast majority (67) occurring in cheerleading. The next [most dangerous sports](#): gymnastics (nine such injuries) and track (seven).

Among college athletes, there have been 39 of these severe injuries: 26 in cheerleading, followed by three in field hockey and two each in lacrosse and gymnastics. The report also notes that according to the NCAA Insurance program, 25 percent of money spent on student athlete injuries in 2005 resulted from cheerleading.

In 2007, however, two catastrophic injuries to female high school cheerleaders were reported, down from 10 in the previous season and the lowest number since 2001. Yet there were three catastrophic injuries to college-level participants, up from one in 2006.

According to the report, almost 95,200 female students take part in high school cheerleading annually, along with about 2,150 males. College participation numbers are hard to find since cheerleading is not an NCAA sport.