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NATIONAL EDITION

# KEEPING WELL<sup>®</sup>

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## baby love

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## Women in sports risk tearing knee ligament

There was a time when women involved in sports were told they ran like girls, hit like girls, and threw like girls. But over the years, the push toward athletic achievement has brought recognition to women for excelling in sports.

While women's athletic skills have soared to all-time highs, one difference between male and female athletes remains: Because of several anatomical differences, women athletes are more prone to some types of injuries. They are especially prone to knee injuries, particularly ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) tears.

The ACL runs through the middle of the knee and is the main stabilizing ligament connecting the thigh-bone and the shinbone.

A sudden twist or jerk, such as that produced by a quick change in direction in basketball or soccer, can tear the ligament. A sudden blow to the knee can also snap the ligament.

The results include pain, inflammation, weakness, stiffness and a

loss of stability in the knee.

In a recent study of intercollegiate basketball players, just over 2 percent of males had torn ACLs, compared to about 16 percent of females.

Women's ACL injury rates in some sports are two to four times higher than men's, according to National Collegiate Athletic Association data.

With more women participating in all levels of sports, the number of ACL injuries in females is increasing, said Mary Lloyd Ireland, M.D., a leading expert in women's sports and orthopedics, speaking at an American College of Sports Medicine conference.

Women are also playing more intensely and aggressively than before.

How exactly do anatomy and muscle strength make women more prone to this type of injury?

■ Women have wider hips than men. As a result, a woman's hipbone connects to her knee at a more dramatic angle. And a woman's knees are closer together than a man's. Both factors can make her knee

more susceptible to injury.

■ Most women have weaker thigh muscles than most men. Part of this is natural strength, but much is due to the conditioning of men. Men usually play sports year-round, whereas women tend to play only some months out of the year, says Dr. Ireland.

■ For years, men have trained in the weight room. Women have just recently headed in that direction.

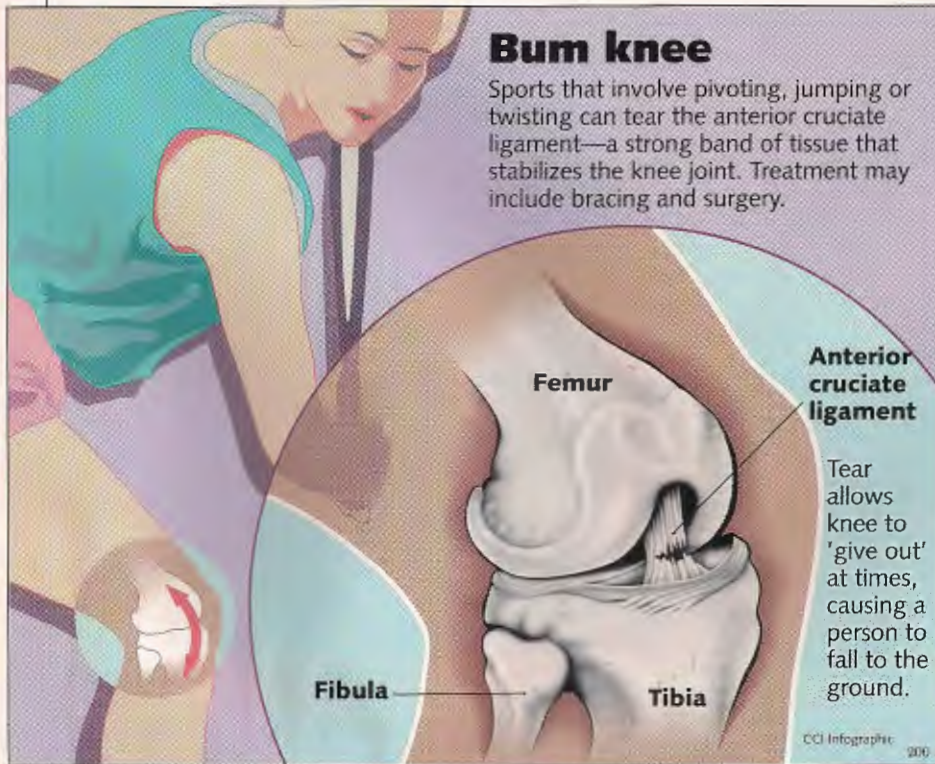
There's not much a woman can do to change what nature has given her. However, she can improve upon it.

Weight training to improve leg muscle strength is one way. "Strengthening of the muscles about the hip and back, as well as the hamstring and quadriceps, using free weights should be in a program of individuals doing high risk sports such as basketball, skiing and soccer," says Dr. Ireland.

Learning to land with knees flexed and rounding turns in a three-point step stop can also lower injury risk.

And sport-specific conditioning and training may reduce injuries.

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### Strengthen your legs



Slowly lift heel up to buttocks. Lower. Repeat with other leg. Do three sets of 10.



Step up with one leg, then the other, then step down. Do three sets of 10.

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