Each year, while NBA players defy gravity and college basketball players fight to survive until March Madness, recreational athletes take to the courts in pick-up games and organized leagues. Like the pros and college players, these athletes are subject to injuries—probably to an even greater extent. Elite players dedicate much of their lives to basketball-specific training, but these players tend to think about basketball only sporadically or at certain times of the year.

During the warmer months, "Many people take part in continuous aerobic sports like running and cycling," says Ed Orr, MS, ATC, CSCS, former assistant athletic trainer for the University of Arizona men’s basketball team. These athletes are not used to the short, intermittent bursts of activity, the quick stops and starts, and the physical contact of basketball. So if you are planning to play hoops this winter, be aware that making the transition to a different type of sport means training to avoid different kinds of injuries.

### Muscle Strains

The quick bursts of speed and direction changes inherent to basketball can make for sore muscles after a game. Athletes are most likely to experience muscle strains early in the season, Orr says, when their conditioning level is not where it needs to be. Even late in the season, however, you could strain a muscle when you are fatigued at the end of a game.

Recreational basketball players can avoid some of the early season muscle trauma by working on strength and conditioning prior to the season. "Work on quick bursts of activity," Orr says. "Try sprinting on the court, both the length and the width, with and without the ball."

If you experience a painful muscle strain, ice it right away and keep icing it on and off for 72 hours or until any swelling has stabilized. Do not apply heat to anything that is swollen. You can also take over-the-counter anti-inflammatory medicines, such as ibuprofen, which are helpful for relieving the pain of many minor injuries.

### Ankle Sprains

When you go up for a rebound amidst a group of scrambling players, you face the possibility of a sprained ankle if you come down on someone else’s foot. These are usually inversion ankle sprains to the ligaments on the outside of the ankle. If you have a history of ankle sprains, Orr says you should consider playing in an ankle brace or taping your ankle.

To treat an ankle sprain, just remember "RICE:" rest, ice, compression, elevation. Icing especially will help control the swelling that can cause pain over the several days following an injury. You may need to see a physician to determine if the ankle is sprained or broken.

### Jammed Finger

If you jam a finger, ice it right away and try to move it as soon as you can. If you think it might be dislocated, you cannot move it at all, or the distal part of the finger stays bent, see your doctor.
Knee Sprain

A common knee sprain in basketball is a medial collateral ligament (MCL) sprain. Orr says these injuries can be caused by either planting then cutting too hard or by hitting the outside of your knee on someone else's planted leg. Preseason leg strengthening may help prevent many knee injuries.

Treat MCL sprains with ice (even though they do not generally swell excessively). Try a knee sleeve for compression and make sure you work on your range of motion as soon as you can. If you tear your MCL, ”That's a fairly serious injury,” Orr says. Get evaluated and treated by a physician.

Torn ACL

Anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) tears are fairly common in basketball. Practice jumping and landing properly balanced on both feet and on the balls of your feet to prevent injury. If you think you might have a torn ACL, get evaluated by an a doctor. A torn ACL may need to be reconstructed if you want to continue to participate in activities such as basketball.

Preseason Drills

Ideally, start training for basketball season three weeks before it starts, building a base of strength and conditioning and building up from there. But for most recreational athletes, "That's just not realistic," says Kevin Coleman, MEd, CSCS, director of strength and conditioning for Olympic sports at the University of Kansas. Still, Coleman says, doing something is better than doing nothing. So try to get at least a base level of conditioning built up in the weeks or months prior to the season. Focus on strength training squats, plyometrics, and jumping drills as well as drills that improve your ability to move well on the court.

Here are a few on-court drills Coleman uses with the University of Kansas basketball teams:

Star Drill

Place four cones in a square, eight to ten feet apart. Stand in the center of the square, and have your drill partner point to a cone. Get yourself to the cone, touch it, and return to the center as quickly as you can. Before you are back to the center, your partner should be pointing to the next cone you have to touch. Start with 30 seconds, and build up to 1-2 minutes. This improves your ability to change direction quickly and be aware of body position.

Zigzag Drill

Place six cones on the court in a zigzag pattern (cones should be about 16 feet apart and at 45° angles). Start at the first cone and sprint to the second, then third, fourth, fifth and sixth. Reverse the pattern and return to the first cone. Repeat for 30 seconds; build up to 1-2 minutes. This gives you practice in quick bursts of speed and shifting direction.

Medicine Ball Shuffle

Stand at one end of the court, facing your partner who is a foot or two away from you. Do a sideways shuffle for the length of the court, passing the medicine ball back and forth. This works your shuffling ability, balance, strength, and ability to stay low.

RESOURCES:

American College of Sports Medicine
http://www.acsm.org/

American Council on Exercise
http://www.acefitness.org/
Canadian Association of Family Physicians
http://www.cfpc.ca/

Canadian Public Health
Health Unit
http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/pau-uap/fitness/

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