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Scooter Riders Face Thrills, Spills, and Strains

They're everywhere—cruising along sidewalks, darting between pedestrians—the shiny silver kickboard scooter is the latest fad among kids, teens, and even adults. With full alloy construction and in-line skate wheels with performance bearings, today's scooter often weighs less than 10 pounds and is capable of high speeds. According to the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), this extra speed can bring greater risk of accident. And as with any physical activity that requires vigorous and repetitive movements, precautions must be taken against injury and physical strain.

"With scooters, just like with skateboards and Rollerblades, riders need to take the proper precautions to avoid an injury or accident," said Teresa Schuemann, PT, SCS. Protective gear is an absolute must — a padded helmet, knee pads, elbow pads, and wrist guards. "These new scooters are so fast that any spill will likely result in considerable force on any part of the body that absorbs the fall. A fall from a moving object will likely result in an upper body injury." She added, "That's why wrist guards are so important — the natural reaction to thrust out the arms to break a fall means that a person's body weight may be completely absorbed by the wrist, easily resulting in a wrist or hand fracture."

Your knees are also subject to injury from spills. A hard fall onto the patella, or kneecap, can do long-lasting damage to the bone and to the tendons and ligaments surrounding the joint. According to Schuemann, another common injury to the knee comes from riders dragging their leg in an effort to slow down. This action makes the knee highly susceptible to injuries of the medial collateral ligament (MCL), which runs along the inside of the knee joint.

Riders must also be aware of stress injuries due to overuse, and be careful to perform adequate stretching and strengthening of the major muscles used for riding.

"Most people ride so that one leg receives most of the muscle exertion and impact while the other leg bears the brunt of the rider's weight," explained Steven R. Tippet, PT, SCS. "A right-handed person will typically use their right leg to push off and propel them along, while their left leg holds their weight and maintains balance. This imbalance can lead to extra strain on the affected parts of the body." For the stabilizing leg, the gluteal and quadriceps muscles do the most work. For the propulsion leg, a rider needs strong hip extensors and quadriceps. All of these muscle groups are susceptible to strains and soreness, so stretching and strengthening are crucial.

According to APTA, scooter riders should also be on the lookout for:

- Knee pain – an aching pain behind the kneecap, especially in the stabilizing leg. This pain is caused by persistent flexing of the knee, such as the squatting or bent knee posture typical while coasting on a scooter.
- Shin splints – a pain that runs along the shinbone. Overexertion and the constant impact of the foot against hard pavement or sidewalks cause shin splints.
- Back pain – cramping or pain in the lower back caused from long periods of leaning forward to maintain balance.

APTA recommends that riders minimize their risks by wearing proper protective gear and making sure that the appropriate muscles are stretched and strengthened before and after riding. Stretches for the hip flexors, hamstrings, quadriceps, calves, and lower back are particularly important. Strengthening exercises for these same areas, in addition to the muscles in the front and back of the trunk, will help protect muscles from strain and prevent injury to knee, ankle, and hip joints. "A strong, flexible body will better tolerate exertion and the inevitable spills," said Tippet. "And combined with wearing the right protective gear, you'll have a much better chance of riding out the craze."

The American Physical Therapy Association is a national professional organization representing more than 70,000 members. Its goal is to foster advancements in physical therapy practice, research, and education.