

Getting Started

Rule set: Written to NHL rules. Where IIHF, USA Hockey or typical rec-league rules differ in a way that changes how you play, it is flagged inline. **Playing in Britain? The IIHF flags are yours** — every level of UK hockey runs the IIHF book, amended locally; see [UK and England Rules](#). **This document is mostly not about rules** — it is about registration, programmes, tiers and etiquette, which are set by national associations, local associations and individual rinks rather than by a rulebook. Where something varies, it says so and tells you how to find your own answer.

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Overview

Every other document here tells you how to play. This one tells you how to *start* playing — how to find a session, what registration involves, which level you belong in, what happens in the first hour at the rink, and the etiquette nobody thinks to explain because everybody there already knows it.

It is written for two readers at once: an adult who has decided to take up hockey, and a parent working out how to get a child onto the ice. The routes are different and both are covered.

One warning up front, and it shapes the whole document. **Hockey is administered locally.** A national governing body sets the rules, the insurance and the safeguarding standards; almost everything you actually care about — the fee, the tier names, the session times, the age cut-offs your club uses — is decided by a local association or an individual rink and changes every season. So wherever a specific number would be invented, this document gives you a sourced example, says it is an example, and tells you which page or which person holds your answer. **"Here is how to find out" is the real answer to most of these questions.**

1. How hockey is organised, and why that matters to you

Almost everywhere, there are four layers between you and the ice:

Layer	What it does	Example
International federation	Rules for international play; recognises one national body per country	The IIHF, which has 84 member national associations — 61 full members and 23 associate members (IIHF, <i>Member National Associations</i>)
National governing body	Registration, insurance, playing rules, coach and official certification, safeguarding	USA Hockey; Hockey Canada; Ice Hockey UK — see the Britain section immediately below, because this layer changed on 30 June 2026
Region / district / branch	Governance and administration between the national body and your club	USA Hockey is divided into 12 geographical districts containing 34 affiliates (<i>USA Hockey Parent Handbook 2025-26</i>)
Local association, club or rink	The thing you actually join. Sets the fees, the schedule, the teams and the tiers	Your town's minor hockey association; your city's adult league; your local rink's drop-in schedule

The practical consequence: the national body's website will tell you what registration *is* and what it buys you. It will not tell you what your season costs or which night you skate. That comes from the bottom layer, and you get it by ringing them.

If you are starting in Britain

Four things about British hockey are different enough from the North American picture above that a beginner needs them before anything else.

1. Who governs the game you are about to join. England Ice Hockey's own *Rules & Regulations* is the document that answers this, and it is worth having the names straight before you ring anybody:

Body	What it governs
England Ice Hockey (EIH)	<i>"the National Governing Body (NGB) responsible for the governance, administration, development and promotion of the sport of ice hockey in England and Wales", overseeing "grassroots (junior) ice hockey, women's ice hockey, senior ice hockey, para (sledge) ice hockey, SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) ice hockey, and recreational (community) ice hockey"</i>
Scottish Ice Hockey Association (SIHA, also written SIH)	Scotland. EIH's own document names it as one of the stakeholders it works with
Ice Hockey UK (IHUK)	The IIHF member body and the GB national teams. It also administers the paperwork that lets a player arrive from abroad: EIH states that international transfers <i>"are subject to IIHF International Transfer requirements which are administered by Ice Hockey UK"</i> , and that work visas are <i>"defined by Ice Hockey UK and HM Border Agency"</i>
British Universities Ice Hockey Association (BUIHA)	University hockey. It adopts the same In-House Rules as EIH and the SIHA

"EIHA" and "England Ice Hockey" are the same organisation. It was the English Ice Hockey Association; you will still see EIHA on club sites, in league names and on older paperwork. Nothing about it is defunct. Note also that **EIH names Wales explicitly** as part of its remit — its Rules & Regulations say "England and Wales" throughout — which is more than any of the playing-rules documents establish.

2. There is now one governing body for all four home nations, and it is very new. On **30 June 2026** the merger of **England Ice Hockey, Scottish Ice Hockey** and **Ice Hockey UK** took effect, creating a single body covering England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Ice Hockey UK announced it as *"the first Olympic sport in Britain to fully unify governance across all home nations"*; member clubs approved it in principle in December 2025 and the three boards ratified it on 16 June 2026. IHUK describes itself as *"the national governing body of the sport of ice hockey in the United Kingdom... Affiliated to the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF)... responsible to the IIHF for the good order of the sport in the UK."*

What that means for you in practice, from IHUK's own member update of 26 June 2026: **Scottish Ice Hockey and England Ice Hockey wrote to their members terminating those memberships from 30 June**, because new IHUK memberships have to be created in their place, and *"all current insurance arrangements under SIH and EIH will continue unchanged."* So **do not assume a registration process you read about last season still applies.** Ask your club which body you are registering with, under which membership year, and what your insurance

covers — as of late July 2026 those answers were still being rebuilt. The English Ice Hockey Association material quoted in section 6 below was accurate for the EIHA and is still the clearest description of how English club registration works, but the organisation that issued it has merged; treat it as the shape of the process rather than as the current paperwork.

Two things the merger has not changed, and both matter more to a beginner than the letterhead does. The **playing rules** are untouched: the In-House Rules for the 2025-26 season are issued in the names of England Ice Hockey, the SIHA and the BUIHA, and the IIHF book underneath them is the same book it was. And the **substance** of registration — what it covers, what it costs you in obligations, when the year runs — is described in EIH's own Rules & Regulations, which is what section 6 below quotes. Read the four bodies in the table above as the ones named in the documents that currently govern your hockey, and the merger as a change to who collects your membership fee.

3. Your league plays IIHF rules, not NHL rules — and that is not a probability, it is written down. Hockey writing in English defaults to the NHL rulebook, and so do these documents. Your operative book is the **IIHF Official Rule Book**. England Ice Hockey states it flatly: *"All EIH sanctioned games and tournaments must abide by the Rules of Ice Hockey as described by the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF)",* and *"where this section contradicts IIHF rules, EIH rules will take precedence."* The In-House Rules issued jointly by England Ice Hockey, the SIHA and the BUIHA say the same from the other end — they *"adopt the IIHF Official Rule Book 2025-2026... as the foundation for the rules of the game to be applied in England and Scotland"* and are *"not intended to serve as a standalone rule book."*

So expect **three** layers, not two: **the IIHF rulebook for what is a penalty, the In-House Rules for the domestic amendments,** and **your section's Rules of Competition for everything about how the competition runs** — roster sizes, minimum bench strength, tiering, suspensions. EIH is explicit that the third layer is somewhere else and that it wins: *"League rules can be found in the Rules of Competition for each section",* and *"any section specific requirements detailed in their rules of competition override this document."*

UK and England Rules owns the amendment list — neck protection, video review, visors, fighting, overtime, junior age categories, team sheets. Read it before your first game rather than after. What matters on day one is that the **IIHF** flags scattered through this corpus are the ones addressed to you:

- **Faceoff violations get your team a warning, not your centre thrown out** (IIHF Rule 76.7), and **winning a draw with your skates is itself a violation** (Rule 76.3(VI)) — it is legal in the NHL. See Faceoffs.

- **After your own icing you cannot change lines and cannot take a time-out**, exactly as in the NHL (IIHF Rules 81.4 and 87.1). USA Hockey allows both, so North American advice on this point does not transfer to you.
- **Checking from behind has no minor-penalty option** — it is a major plus an automatic game misconduct (IIHF Rules 43.2 and 43.3). See Body Contact and Battles.
- **The trapezoid is in your rulebook and, in England and Wales, may not be enforced against you.** IIHF Rule 27.7 restricts the goaltender to a marked area behind the net on pain of a delay-of-game minor — but England Ice Hockey's Rules & Regulations say the *"Goalkeepers' Restricted Area is not currently enforced to allow ice rinks the necessary time to make the changes to implement this rule."* **England Ice Hockey governs England and Wales only** (Rules & Regulations 1.1), so that suspension does not reach Scotland or BUIHA hockey, where the In-House Rules are silent and 27.7 reads as live. **If it is your goalie, play as though it binds; if it is theirs, plan as though they may come for a dumped puck. Ask before you assume either way.** The edition of that document read for this corpus is the **2024-2025** one, and the 2025-26 In-House Rules do not mention the restricted area at all, so this may have moved; your rink may also simply have no trapezoid painted on it. See Goaltender.

4. The rink you play on is probably not 200 by 85 feet. Nearly every diagram, distance and angle in hockey coaching comes from the NHL sheet. The IIHF book does not specify one size — **Rule 1.2 permits any sheet 60 m long and between 26 m and 30 m wide**, which is a spread of over thirteen feet in width between two equally legal rinks. So "we play IIHF rules" tells you which penalties get called and tells you nothing whatever about the size of the ice, and neither the NHL diagram nor a single metric figure is safe to assume. On a wide sheet the corners are further from the net, the half-wall is further from the slot, and angling an attacker into the boards stops being a kill shot. **Rink Map and Glossary owns rink geometry** and sets out both specifications side by side, what the extra width changes shift by shift, and what to check on your first skate at an unfamiliar rink. Read it before you take the spacing advice in the systems documents literally.

And in England the floor is lower than the IIHF book's, not just different: England Ice Hockey authorises rinks *below* the federation's minimum for domestic use, with named venues restricted to junior hockey. The provision and the exceptions belong to UK and England Rules. The practical instruction is the same one: **look at the sheet you are actually standing on.**

2. Routes onto the ice — adults

Step zero: can you skate?

If you cannot skate, learn to skate first or alongside. You do not need to be good. The NHL/NHLPA Learn to Play programme puts it this way for children, and it applies just as well to adults: participants are *"strongly encouraged to complete a 'Learn to Skate' program at a local rink before signing up."*

Public skating sessions are the cheapest ice you will ever buy, and going twice a week for a month before you spend anything on gear is a genuinely good plan. See Skating for what to actually work on — and note that almost every adult skating fault is a straight-legs fault.

The four things adults can sign up for

1. Adult learn-to-play / "hockey 101" programmes. A fixed block of sessions mixing instruction with a supervised scrimmage. These exist under many names and are the single best entry point for an adult beginner, because everyone else there is also new.

A concrete, sourced example of what one looks like — the Adult Safe Hockey League's **ASHL Hockey 101**, as listed on the ASHL site on 27 July 2026. Every session runs to the same published plan: a five-minute warm-up, a block of team tactics and skill development, and a **30-minute guided scrimmage**. ASHL describes it as *"ideal for players looking to join the ASHL, players coming back to the game after a prolonged absence, or current ASHL players in a lower level."*

The blocks themselves vary a lot, even inside one league. Across the ten player listings on that page the blocks ran from **4 sessions to 14**, and the player price from **CAD \$148.00 to CAD \$444.00** — the \$148 four-session block at one Vancouver-area rink being the shortest and cheapest thing on the page, not the typical one. Goalies were listed at **\$0.00 at most locations but not all**: two sites charged goalies exactly the same as skaters.

Those are one league's prices at one moment, in Canadian dollars. **Do not budget from any of them**, and do not assume the cheapest listing is the going rate. They are here to show you the *shape* of the thing: a handful of sessions, coached, ending in a game, and often — though not always — free or heavily discounted if you are willing to play goal.

2. Stick-and-puck / drop-in / shinny. Unstructured paid ice. No coach, no registration beyond a waiver, pay at the door. Covered in detail in section 4.

3. An adult recreational league. A season of scheduled games, usually with a division structure. Some leagues take individual players and place them on a team; others only take whole

teams. Ask which before you assume you need eleven friends.

4. A club that runs an adult section. In England, for example, the EIHA states that "*Most clubs across England offer beginner sessions and learn-to-play programmes designed for adults and children of all ages*" and that "*Most clubs are happy to arrange a trial session so you can experience the sport before making any commitment.*" Asking for a trial session is normal and costs you nothing but the phone call.

The English route in, as England Ice Hockey itself describes it

EIH does not publish a "how to start playing" pathway in its Rules & Regulations. What it publishes instead is the *registration* side of the same question — and read the right way, that tells you what a beginner is expected to do, because EIH sells four different registrations and three of them are for people who are not yet playing games:

- **Trial — a 28-day registration** covering "*training sessions with the designated team/club*", carrying "*training only insurance*". You get **a maximum of two trials per calendar year**. This is the formal version of "can I come and try it", and the fact that EIH has a named product for it is your evidence that asking is normal.
- **Learn to Play (L2P) — a 10-week registration** "*that allows an individual to play within a formal L2P scheme*", covering "*EIH L2P events, club or rink led programmes*" and, where the club runs one, "*in-house game play*" delivered "*as structured learning activity by coaches within a single club environment.*" This is England's equivalent of the North American learn-to-play block described above, and note who delivers it: **the club or the rink**, not EIH centrally.
- **Insurance only — a season-long** registration for "*training only*", which also covers L2P activity. This is the one for someone skating with a club but not yet playing fixtures.
- **Standard registration — season-long**, and the one that lets you "*take part in all sanctioned activities*": L2P, team training, development events, sanctioned training camps and competitive fixtures.

The honest gap, and it is a real one: EIH's Rules & Regulations do not tell you how to find any of this. There is no session finder, no club directory, no learn-to-skate scheme and no taster-event calendar in that document — it is a governance document, written for clubs that already exist. It tells you what a Trial or an L2P registration *is*; it does not tell you which rink near you runs one, when, or for how much.

So do what the North American sections of this document tell an American or a Canadian to do, in the same order: ring your local rink, and ring your national body. The rink knows its own public skating, its learn-to-skate class and which clubs use its ice, because it

sells them all the ice. EIH and the SIHA know which clubs are affiliated. Neither answer is in a rulebook, and this document will not invent a session format, a fee or a club name to fill the gap. Section 10 has the starting points and the questions to ask.

A note on playing goal

If you are considering goaltending, say so early and loudly. Goalies are scarce at every level of amateur hockey, and the economics often reflect it — in the ASHL Hockey 101 listings above, most locations priced the goalie place at \$0.00 against \$148 to \$444 for a skater, though a couple charged goalies the same as everyone else. Clubs also frequently own goal equipment and loan it, because the kit is expensive and nobody wants a goalie shortage. **Ask; do not assume it is free.** See Goaltender.

3. Routes onto the ice — children

Try-it-once events

Try Hockey For Free (USA Hockey) is a one-session taster held at hundreds of rinks. From USA Hockey's own event site, retrieved 27 July 2026: the national dates for the coming season are **3 October 2026 and 27 February 2027**, it is aimed at ages **4 to 9**, *"Most host locations will have loaner equipment"*, and — the question every parent asks — *"Do I need a USA Hockey membership to Try Hockey? No!"* A waiver at registration provides the cover for the event itself. **The scale figure comes from a different USA Hockey page** — its *Come Play Youth Hockey* page, not the event site — which calls Try Hockey For Free *"the world's largest introduction-to-hockey initiative, annually spanning more than 800 rinks nationwide."*

Esso Fun Days (Hockey Canada) is the equivalent introduction to the female game. Hockey Canada's **parent FAQ** — not its pathway page, which mentions the programme only in a single line — describes it as *"a hockey experience program that combines on-ice and off-ice instruction to give girls and women of all ages a first taste of organized hockey, with no fees and no obligations to sign up for a league."*

Learn-to-skate

Learn to Skate USA runs at *"nearly 1,000 locations"* across the United States. In Canada the equivalent is **CanSkate**, run through Skate Canada clubs; Hockey Canada's own pathway page points parents at Skate Canada's club finder as well as at municipal parks-and-recreation programmes. In England and elsewhere, the rink itself usually runs the learn-to-skate class.

Learn-to-skate is not a hockey programme and does not need to be finished first — but a child who can stand up, glide and stop unaided will get vastly more out of their first hockey session.

Learn-to-play

NHL/NHLPA Learn to Play, delivered with USA Hockey and NHL clubs, is the flagship North American entry programme. From its own About page, retrieved 27 July 2026:

- Designed for **first-time players aged 4 to 9**. Genuinely first-time: *"The program is offered to new, first-time participants... those participants who have not previously been registered to USA Hockey a sanctioned youth hockey program."*
- **Approximately 4-8 weeks**, one lesson per week.
- **Head-to-toe equipment is provided**, with *"a nominal participation fee"* that *"may vary by market and facility."*
- Governing-body registration is included for the programme year. Note the season boundary: USA Hockey *"membership runs Sept 1-Aug 31 annually."*
- Registration is **online only** — *"phone and/or in-person registration at individual rinks will not be accepted"* — and popular sites run waiting lists.

The First Shift (NHL/NHLPA with Hockey Canada and Bauer) is the Canadian counterpart: Hockey Canada describes it as a *"6-week learn-to-play program for kids aged 6 to 10 that includes head-to-toe Bauer equipment."*

Verification note: the domain `thefirstshift.ca` now redirects to an unrelated commercial site, and `firstshift.ca` refused automated retrieval on 27 July 2026. The programme description above is quoted from **Hockey Canada's** own pathway page, which links to `firstshift.ca`. Reach the programme through Hockey Canada's page rather than by typing a remembered domain.

If your child is starting in England

England Ice Hockey's Rules & Regulations do not describe a taster event, a learn-to-skate scheme or a small-area-games mandate of the kind USA Hockey and Hockey Canada publish, so **this document cannot tell you what an English child's first session looks like**. What EIH does establish, and what is worth knowing before you ring a club:

- **Junior hockey is mixed.** *"All junior leagues are mixed-gender."* There is no separate girls' ladder at junior level to choose between, and the playing age categories are unisex — UK and England Rules has them.

- **The youngest category is Under 10, and it is the one age group you cannot be too late for.** To register as U10 a player must be *"under the age of 10 on 31 December in the year that the registration period commences"* — and where every other registration closes on **31 January** of the playing season, *"those registering at U10... may register at any time."*
- **A cage, not a visor.** *"Face cages for all junior hockey games are mandatory, and must be worn as per the manufacturers stipulations. Cages must be tight against the player's chin at all times."*
- **Safeguarding sits on the club, and it is a condition of the club existing.** An affiliated club must *"have a Designated Safeguarding Lead if there are players aged under 18 in the Club."* Ask who yours is — that is a fair first question, and a club that cannot answer it has a problem.
- **Junior games are filmed.** *"Every junior fixture, including challenge games, must be recorded"* so recordings can go to disciplinary panels on request, using an EIH-owned camera system, under EIH's Filming and Photography Policy. Parents who are surprised by a camera at a U12 game should not be.

Then: joining a team

After a learn-to-play block, the next step is registering with a local association for a full season. In Canada that means the **Timbits U7** cross-ice programme or the **U9** half-ice programme depending on age; in the US it means an **8U** or **10U** team at your local association. Both national bodies deliberately keep the youngest age groups on a smaller playing surface — Hockey Canada mandates cross-ice at U7 and half-ice at U9, and USA Hockey's recommended 8U experience is *"no full-time goalies, 7-9 players per team, station-based practices and cross-ice games."* If your first reaction is that your child should be playing on the full sheet, read those two sentences again: the small surface is the point, not a compromise.

4. Drop-in, stick-and-puck and shinny — what the words mean

These three words describe **conventions, not defined categories**, and rinks use them inconsistently. The distinctions below are the common ones. **Treat the rink's own posted session description as the authority, not this table** — and if it does not say, ring and ask, because turning up to a full-contact drop-in expecting a skills session is how people get hurt.

Session type	Usually means	Usually has	Usually does not have
Stick-and-puck	Open ice for individual practice	Full gear or at least helmet and gloves; many pucks; people shooting, stickhandling and skating on their own	Teams, a game, a goalie, referees
Drop-in	Pick-up game — you pay, you are given a jersey colour, you play	Full gear, goalies (sometimes), rolling shifts, a scoreboard nobody watches	Referees, standings, any obligation beyond the session
Shinny	Informal pick-up hockey, indoor or outdoor. In much of Canada it is the standard municipal-rink term for pick-up	Varies enormously — some are no-contact, no-lift-the-puck, no-goalie sessions for all ages	Anything reliable enough to assume

The three questions that actually matter, and you ask them at the desk:

1. **What gear is required?** Many stick-and-puck sessions require only a helmet; most drop-ins require full equipment and will turn you away without it.
2. **What is the standard?** Rinks often run separate beginner, intermediate and advanced drop-ins. Turning up to the wrong one is the most common beginner mistake and the most easily avoided.
3. **Is there contact, and is lifting the puck allowed?** Both vary, and both are house rules rather than rulebook rules.

Drop-in and stick-and-puck ice is also, as Practice and Development puts it, "*usually the cheapest and highest-value ice you can buy*" — especially for a rec player whose team gets one slot a week and no practice.

5. Tiers and divisions — and how to work out where you belong

The honest headline: the names vary by country, by association and by year, and there is no single ladder. What follows is what two national bodies actually publish, so that you recognise the *shape* when you meet your own version of it.

Age divisions

Hockey Canada (2025-26 chart, from its Age Divisions page): **U7 (Timbits)** for players six and under, **U9** for seven and eight, **U11** for nine and ten, **U13** for eleven and twelve, **U15** for thirteen and fourteen, **U18** for fifteen to seventeen, **U21** for eighteen to twenty. The chart works from "Age on Dec. 31" of the season's first year, and notes that the Timbits U7 programme is for players under seven as of that date, *"local hockey associations have the option of registering four-year-olds."* The rule is stated in words on Hockey Canada's **parent FAQ** rather than on the chart page: *"Players are placed into age categories according to what age they will be by December 31 of the current calendar year."*

USA Hockey (Youth/Girls classifications, *Parent Handbook 2025-26*): **8U** (8 and under), **10U** (9–10), **12U** (11–12), **14U** (13–14), **15 Only** (15-year-olds), **16U** (15–16), **18U** (17–18), and **19U** for girls only (17–19).

Note that these overlap deliberately — a 15-year-old may be eligible for 15 Only or 16U — and that the birth-date rule for determining a player's class is set by the national body's annual guide, not by the playing rulebook. **Check the current year's chart; do not work it out from a sibling's experience two seasons ago.**

Competitive levels within an age group

Hockey Canada publishes three, and defines them clearly enough to quote:

- **House League** (also called local league) — *"a recreational level of play. Most teams at this league level have 1-2 practices and one game per week... Registration is typically inexpensive, and away games are rarely hosted more than an hour's drive away. House league players are almost always given equal ice time regardless of skill or talent."*
- **AE (Alternate/Additional Entry)** — a middle tier that **not all associations offer**, for players of near-Rep standard who cannot be accommodated on the Rep roster. Typically two 90-minute practices, one home and one away game weekly, away games up to a 90-minute drive.
- **Rep (Representative)** — the association's top team for that age group, *"about twice the time commitment of house league hockey. Expect a minimum of one practice, one development session and two games per week."* Entry is by tryout, and *"Head coaches on AE and Rep teams have the exclusive right to decide which players will be offered spots."*

USA Hockey associations use a different and less standardised vocabulary — you will meet "house", "travel", "select", "Tier I", "Tier II", "AAA", "AA", "A" and "B" in various combinations.

These competitive-level labels are set by affiliates and local associations, not published as a single national ladder alongside the age classifications, so the same word can mean

different things two states apart. This document will not give you a national US tier table, because checking USA Hockey's own published parent materials produced age classifications and no such table. Ask your affiliate or association directly what levels they run and what each one means locally.

The English structure, and where a beginner actually enters it

England has no tier vocabulary problem of the American kind, because **EIH owns its leagues outright**: *"All EIH leagues are solely owned and operated by EIH."* What it does have is a set of **sections**, and the section you register into is the thing that decides which rules of competition apply to you. From EIH's own list of player membership categories:

Category	Who it is for
NIHL	<i>"a player who is eligible under the NIHL Regulations to compete in the National Ice Hockey League"</i> — the senior league structure below the professional Elite League
WNIHL	<i>"a player who is eligible under the WNIHL Regulations to compete in the Women's National Ice Hockey League"</i>
Under 18/U19 and Under 10	Junior hockey, by age on 31 December
Recreational	<i>"a player who participates in the EIH Recreational Section"</i> — the adult game most beginners actually join
Para and SEND	Para (sledge) ice hockey under BPIHA regulations, and SEND club activity

Two things to take from that table. First, **"Recreational" is a governing-body section with its own registration category and its own rules of competition, not a loose description of a beer league** — if you are an adult beginner in England, that is almost certainly the door you come in through. Second, **the tiering happens one level below this**. EIH does not publish a national ladder of divisions any more than USA Hockey does: *"EIH league structure is outlined in each section's rules and is subject to change from time to time"*, and *"league rules can be found in the Rules of Competition for each section."* Get your section's Rules of Competition from your club.

Above the NIHL sits the Elite Ice Hockey League (EIHL), the professional tier. It is not one of EIH's membership categories and not one of its leagues; EIH's rulebook mentions it only in passing, treating **EIHL and NIHL fixtures together as "senior" games whose ice takes priority** when a fixture has to be rearranged. UK and England Rules sets out which rule book each of those levels runs on. For a beginner the practical shape is: **EIHL professional at the top,**

NIHL senior below it, and the recreational and junior sections under EIH where you will start.

On who may play where, EIH sets three rules directly rather than leaving them to sections: *"EIH allow women and individuals that identify as non-binary to participate in senior National Ice Hockey League(s)"; "EIH allows male netminders U16 to play in the Women's National Ice Hockey League"; and "all junior leagues are mixed-gender."* If you play in more than one league, you pay once — *"the player is only required to purchase the lowest fee for the age group they qualify for."*

Adult tiers

Adult hockey is tiered by **age bracket** and by **standard**, usually independently. USA Hockey's own Adult National Championships are a clean worked example of the pattern — the 2026 men's event ran **40+, 50+ Tier 1, 50+ Tier 2, 50+ Tier 3, 50+ Tier 4, 60+ Tier 1, 60+ Tier 2, 60+ Tier 3, 70+ and 75+**; the women's event ran **21+ Tier 1, 21+ Tier 2, 21+ Tier 3, 30+, 40+, 50+ Tier 1, 50+ Tier 2 and 60+**. USA Hockey notes that these events are *"recreational, non-check, and the only pre-requisite to register is everyone must be a current USA Hockey member."*

Local adult leagues use the same idea with local labels — letters (A/B/C/D), numbers (Division 1 through 6), or words (Elite / Competitive / Recreational / Beginner). Hockey Canada's affiliated **Adult Safe Hockey League** says of itself: *"Whether you're a beginner or an ex-pro, we play year-round and we've got a division for you."* Its scale is quoted two different ways by the two bodies that quote it — Hockey Canada's adult page says *"more than 65,000 players on the ice in 13 Canadian locations"*, the ASHL's own About page says *"14 locations, more than 65,000 players."* That one-location discrepancy is a fair illustration of how much precision to expect from any of these numbers.

Working out which tier you belong in

There is no test for this and no source that gives you one, so treat the following as **experience-based judgement, not sourced guidance**:

- **Start one tier below where your ego puts you.** Moving up mid-season is easy and welcomed. Moving down is awkward and is usually preceded by a bad injury or a bad month.
- **Go and watch a game at the level you are considering.** Twenty minutes in the stands answers the question better than any description. Watch whether players can stop on both sides, receive a hard pass, and *change on the fly* — substitute while the play is still running, which is how hockey does most of its substitutions — without a collision. Those three tell you the level faster than the score does.

- **Ask the league manager or club to place you.** They do this constantly, they would much rather place you correctly than lose you, and their assessment is usually better than yours.
 - **Ask for a trial or a skills session before committing.** Standard practice at most clubs, and free at many.
 - **Skating is the sorting variable.** Not shooting, not hockey sense. If you cannot stop on both edges and skate backwards, you belong in a beginner group regardless of how well you handle a puck. See Skating.
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6. Registration — what it is, what it buys, what it costs

What you are registering with

Playing organised hockey almost always means an individual membership with the national governing body, taken out **through your club or association** rather than directly. **British readers: the body you register with changed on 30 June 2026** — England Ice Hockey and Scottish Ice Hockey memberships were terminated on that date and are being reissued by Ice Hockey UK, so check the current process with your club rather than working from any published sequence, including the one below. See "If you are starting in Britain" in section 1. The EIHA described the sequence plainly for England and Wales, and it remains the clearest account of the *shape* of the process: "*Registration begins with the individual joining or being associated with an affiliated club*", the club then submits the registration to the governing body via an online portal "*including required documents (photo ID, proof of age etc)*", and "*Once approved... the individual is covered by insurance and eligible to participate in sanctioned activities.*"

Registration years do not follow the calendar and do not run from the date you pay.

USA Hockey membership "*runs Sept 1-Aug 31 annually.*" Joining in June may buy you three months, not twelve. Ask before you pay.

Registering with England Ice Hockey

England Ice Hockey's *Rules & Regulations* is the document that governs this, and it is more specific than most beginners expect. What it establishes:

You register with EIHA, but only your club can complete it. "*All individuals must register directly with EIHA and follow their EIHA affiliated club's membership process. EIHA registration is only confirmed upon successful completion of the registration process by the affiliated club selected*"

and provision of the documentation required by EIHA as outlined in this rule book." Registration is "open to everyone, however some clubs may limit their membership" — and if a club declines you or makes an error, "an individual may transfer to the correct club by notifying the registration secretary." You normally register for **one club only**.

The registration year runs 1 August to 31 July, and there is a deadline in it. "All registrations run from 1 August to 31 July unless otherwise noted. Players may register up until 31 January of the playing season, with the exception of those registering at U10 who may register at any time." And the clause that costs money: "**Pro-rata discounts are not available.**" Registering in April buys you the remainder of a season, at the price of a season.

⚠ Two different registration years are in circulation and this document cannot reconcile them. The Rules & Regulations quoted above say 1 August to 31 July for registrations generally, with the caveat "unless otherwise noted". The EIHA's own Registration web page describes the **recreational** section separately, as "a fixed annual insurance period (from 1 October to 30 September)" which "must be renewed each year; registration is not valid for 12 months from date of submission." Both may be right — the recreational section may be the thing "otherwise noted" — but **ask your club which year your registration runs on before you pay**, because the answer changes what you get for the money.

What the fee buys, in EIHA's own words. "All registrations include: Insurance for EIHA sanctioned competitions and activities. Affiliation fees to EIHA, IHUK and IIHF as appropriate. Provision of core activities to the development of ice hockey in the UK... Enforcement of EIHA Rule Book and policies to a consistently high standard." Note the second line: **one payment covers your affiliation up the chain to Ice Hockey UK and to the IIHF.** You do not join those separately.

What it costs is not in the rulebook, and this document will not guess. The fee is "determined by the Board on an annual basis and published on EIHA website", and it varies by registration type and age category. Two figures that are fixed and published: you may cancel within **14 days** of accepting the terms, and a refund is then paid "less a fixed fee of £5.00GBP for the period of registration and an administration fee of £20.00GBP" — with **no refund at all** if you have already played in competition during that cooling-off period. Outside 14 days there are **no refunds** "except where there is non-delivery of the services offered by EIHA or in exceptional circumstances, including but not limited to season-ending injuries or long-term illness" — assessed case by case, and pro-rata if agreed.

Register before the day of the game, not on it. "To be eligible for EIHA-sanctioned competitions, players must be registered with EIHA to the club and team they are playing for prior

to the day of the fixture." A team that plays an unregistered player is icing an ineligible player, and the sanction lands on the team.

And one asymmetry worth knowing before you retire in a huff: *"A member who has retired is unable to reapply for EIH membership for a minimum of three months following the retirement date."*

Why it exists: insurance and safeguarding

This is the part beginners assume is bureaucracy, and it is not.

Insurance. Hockey Canada's parent FAQ states that its plan *"costs \$21.30 per participant per season and provides \$20 million in general liability coverage, plus accidental medical and dental insurance, as well as accidental death or dismemberment, and directors and officers liability insurance, to all players, coaches, volunteers and referees registered with Hockey Canada."* On the adult side, Hockey Canada lists **\$20 million of commercial general liability with participant-to-participant liability included, up to \$1 million of accidental death and dismemberment cover, and up to \$5,000 in accidental dental and medical insurance.** The ASHL adds the practical detail that *"Injury reports must be completed in full no later than 90 days from the date of the injury"* and that claims *"may take upwards of 6-8 weeks to process."*

In England, the insurance is the registration — EIH does not describe them as separable. *"All players, coaches, managers, team bench off-ice officials, off-ice officials and club committee members must be registered and insured through EIH."* Cover extends to *"any EIH affiliated club training session, any EIH sanctioned competition, including Challenge Games and tournaments, and any EIH run or sanctioned hockey camp"*, and **a team travelling outside the United Kingdom needs separate EIH travel insurance**, bought when applying to travel to the tournament. Claims go *"directly to EIH's insurance broker via EIH Insurance Claim Form"*, and a personal-accident claim needs *"a doctor's certificate and appropriate evidence and witnesses"* — which is a reason to get seen and get it written down on the night rather than a week later. **This document does not have the cover limits;** EIH publishes them separately from the rulebook, and no figure is quoted here because none was verified.

Sanctioned versus unsanctioned. Hockey Canada is blunt about the trade: unsanctioned leagues *"operate without a constitution, without bylaws, without insurance and with their own customized rulebook for game play"*, it *"cannot hear appeals, insure players or ensure a consistently high standard of game play"* in them, and — the clause that catches families out — *"If you choose to register your child in a non-member league, your child will immediately lose all Hockey Canada membership privileges for the remainder of the hockey season."* Its sanctioning comparison adds that a player is *"ineligible if participating in non-sanctioned hockey after*

September 30" for the remainder of that season's sanctioned play. Whatever you think of the politics, **know which kind of hockey you are signing up for before you sign.**

England draws the same line, and draws it harder. EIHF states that "*EIHF participants are only insured through EIHF insurance when the game or tournament has been sanctioned by EIHF*" — so an unsanctioned fixture is an uninsured one, full stop. And playing in a competition EIHF does not recognise is itself an offence: "*Any EIHF-registered player or official participating in domestic or international leagues or competitions not recognised by EIHF or IIHF will face a suspension from all authorised domestic or international competitions and severe financial penalties.*" The same applies to clubs that lend their ice to such competitions, which "*may face a ban from EIHF/IIHF recognised competitions.*" **Before you join a midweek league that someone set up at your rink, ask whether it is EIHF-sanctioned.** If it is not, you are uninsured in it and you may be risking the hockey you already play.

Safeguarding obligations, including on you. These fall on adults as well as players:

- **USA Hockey:** SafeSport training is required annually, before first contact with minor participants, for "*all employees, coaches, officials, managers, volunteers and players 17 and older playing in an age category that allows minor age players*"; background checks every other year for adults with regular access to minors.
- **Hockey Canada:** the Respect in Sport parent programme is "*a condition of participation in most local hockey associations. At least one parent or caregiver in your household must maintain active RIS certification for your child to be eligible to play hockey.*" It costs "\$12 for parents or \$30 for coaches", runs as six modules of about ten minutes for parents, and may need renewing every three to four years depending on your member branch.
- **EIHA:** coaches and managers must "*meet additional criteria (DBS check if working with under-18s, first-aid, safeguarding training).*"
- **England Ice Hockey** puts the obligation on the club rather than on the parent. An affiliated club must "*have a Head Coach who is an EIHF licenced L2 Team Coach*" and "*a Designated Safeguarding Lead if there are players aged under 18 in the Club*", and every registered member agrees to "*be aware of and abide by EIHF's Safeguarding Policies*" and its Code of Conduct, Social Media and anti-doping rules as a condition of registering. On the bench, "*no person under the age of 18 can take control of the bench*", and coaches and managers "*must display their licenses for the duration of the game.*" **This document found no EIHF equivalent of Hockey Canada's compulsory parent course** — that is an absence in the source, not a statement that none exists; ask your club.

What you will be asked for

Hockey Canada's registration answer is a good checklist for anywhere: personal details including *"name, address, date of birth, hockey history"* and a provincial or territorial *"medical insurance number"*; and for a first registration, *"a copy of your child's birth certificate and two documents proving your place of residence"* — a utility bill, tax assessment, school registration or insurance document. Associations also have **geographic boundaries** determining which one you register with; Hockey Canada notes these are set by its member branches and that local associations are responsible for their accuracy.

England has no equivalent published checklist, and no geographic boundaries. EIH's Rules & Regulations require *"provision of the documentation required by EIH as outlined in this rule book"* — but the rule book does not then list it for players. The EIHA's Registration page describes an online portal submission *"including required documents (photo ID, proof of age etc)"*, which is the closest thing to a list this corpus found, and it is a web page rather than a regulation. **Ask your club what to bring.** What EIH does replace boundaries with is clubs being tied to rinks: a national affiliated club *"should operate in the proximity of their rink"*, and any club needs *"a suitable venue for playing ice hockey on EIH approved venue list."* So your choice of club is in practice a choice of rink, and nothing stops you registering at one further away.

When registration happens

Hockey Canada: *"Early registration typically opens in the spring or summer (between April and June), with main registration usually taking place during July and August. Evaluations or try-outs typically happen in September."* Exact dates are set association by association. **The practical point is that youth hockey registration happens months before the season** — if you decide in October that your child should play this winter, you may be late, and it is still worth ringing.

England's dates are published, and they run earlier than you would guess. Clubs must *"submit an expression of interest to enter a competition by 30 April prior to the start of the following season"* and must re-affiliate *"at least 14 days prior to the opening of EIH individual registration window, normally set as the 1 July"* — EIH reserving the right to move that date. **So the individual registration window normally opens around 1 July**, the registration year starts 1 August, and the door closes on 31 January for everyone except U10. Deciding in February is not late for a taster; it is late for a season.

What a season commits you to — time

Hockey Canada's own estimate: *"Depending on the level of hockey your child plays, your time commitment could range from just 3 hours per week for House League up to 6-7 hours per week"*

(*plus travel time*) for Rep." On travel, it expects house-league away games within an hour's drive, Rep up to 90 minutes, and "*less than three hours per week round-trip*" in total for a typical schedule.

USA Hockey frames the same thing as ice sessions per season, from its Parent Handbook: roughly **50-60 sessions at 8U; 95-100 at 10U** (of which 75-80 are practices and 20-25 are game days); **160 at 14U and 16U** (120-130 practices, 40-50 games); and **200 for 18U males and 19U females**. Note the ratio at every level: **practices massively outnumber games**. A programme selling you mostly games is not following its own governing body's guidance.

For an adult, a rec league season is typically one game a week plus whatever extra ice you choose to buy. Practice and Development has a realistic weekly plan.

What a season commits you to — money

This document will not give you a figure for your association, because any figure it invented would be wrong. What it can give you is sourced context and the questions that get you a real answer.

- **Hockey Canada's published average is old and it says so:** "*A 2011-2012 survey by Hockey Canada found that the average cost of hockey enrollment is \$1,200 for registration and ice time.*" That is a **fourteen-year-old survey figure** as of 2026. Use it to understand that the cost is measured in hundreds-to-thousands per season, not to budget.
- **Costs are set at the bottom layer.** Hockey Canada: "*Registration costs and tournament fees are set at the local association level. Equipment costs are set by manufacturers and retailers. Arena time costs are set by local arenas.*"
- **Ask what the fee actually buys.** The USA Hockey Parent Handbook's own instruction to parents: "*Ask your local association what is included in return for your registration fees, and how the money is allocated toward ice time, officials, travel, and administration. Ensure these topics are covered during preliminary parent meetings so you understand your financial commitment for the season.*"
- **Budget for the extras.** Hockey Canada lists travel and tournament costs, team clothing and end-of-season coach gifts as normal additional expenses, and notes that teams commonly fundraise or pool to cover them.
- **Financial assistance exists and is underused.** Hockey Canada names **The Big Play** with Canadian Tire Jumpstart ("*up to \$500 per child*", first-come first-served), **KidSport Canada**, the YMCA's **YRASP** programme ("*up to \$500 per child per year*") and the **NHLPA Goals & Dreams Fund**, and adds that members and local associations often run their own schemes. Ask. Nobody will offer.

7. Your first practice, first drop-in, first anything

Before you leave the house

- **Confirm the session, the time and the gear requirement** — by phone or from the rink's own page, not from a friend's memory.
- **Pack the night before** and go through the bag. Equipment has a full pre-game checklist; the two items new players forget are a mouthguard and tape.
- **Bring water, a towel, and something to wear on the walk back to the car.** You will be soaked.
- **Bring the paperwork** if you have not registered online — waiver, membership number, or the confirmation email.

When to arrive

The convention throughout, from Team Play and Culture, which owns this: **"on time" in hockey means dressed and ready before the stated time**, which in practice means arriving **45 to 60 minutes before a game** and **20 to 30 minutes before a practice**.

For a genuine first session, err longer. The NHL/NHLPA Learn to Play programme tells parents to *"arrive a minimum of 60 minutes prior to start time for your first on-ice session to provide enough time for your child to check-in and get dressed."* Dressing takes twice as long the first three times as it will thereafter.

In England the 60 minutes is written into the rules — for your coaches. EIHL requires that *"relevant representatives of each team must arrive at the game venue a minimum of 60 minute[s]"* before face-off, those representatives being *"the team coaches or manager"*, with an officials' meeting 40 minutes before face-off. That is not a rule about you; it is a good indication of what your coach expects the room to look like when they walk into it. One rule *is* about you, from the In-House Rules: **all players must be dressed and on the bench or the ice by the start of the second period to take any part in the game**, and the officials cross off anybody who is not.

The dressing room

Covered fully in Team Play and Culture — read its dressing-room section before your first session. The short version: take an unclaimed spot near the door and ask if it's someone's, keep your bag

under the bench rather than sprawled across your neighbour, say hello to the room, listen more than you talk, and leave the goalie alone in the last stretch before ice.

Nobody will comment on your gear or your skating. They will comment, silently and permanently, on someone who takes up three stalls or who is still lacing skates when the ice is ready.

Getting on the ice

- **Step on and skate.** A couple of easy laps in the direction everyone else is going, then stretch if you stretch. Do not stand at the gate.
- **Do not skate through the goalie's crease** — the painted blue semicircle in front of each net, which is the goaltender's own ground. Both goalies clear it of snow and treat it as theirs. See Team Play and Culture — this is custom after the whistle, and a much narrower rule (goaltender interference) during play.
- **Shoot at a net, not at a person, and not at a goalie who has not signalled they are ready.** The universal signal is the goalie facing you, set, with the stick down. A goalie who is drinking, adjusting a strap or talking to someone is not ready. This one carries real injury risk and is the etiquette breach that most reliably makes people angry.

How a drill line works

If you have never been in a coached practice, this is the mechanic that confuses people most:

1. **The coach explains and usually demonstrates the drill once.** Get within earshot; standing at the back of a group of twenty and hoping is how you end up going the wrong way.
2. **Players form lines, usually in corners.** Join the shortest, not the one with the good players in it.
3. **You go on the whistle, or when the player in front of you is roughly halfway through.** Watch the first two groups before it is your turn — that is what the first two groups are for.
4. **Go at full speed and get out of the way at the end.** The single most common beginner error is finishing a drill and then standing where the next player needs to be.
5. **If you get it wrong, keep skating and rejoin the line.** Nobody cares. Stopping to apologise in the middle of the ice causes the collision.

On a whistle, stop what you are doing and look at the coach. Continuing to shoot pucks while someone is talking is the fastest way to be noticed for the wrong reason.

Drop-in and pick-up etiquette

These are conventions, not rules, and they vary by rink — but they are close to universal.

Labelled as experience-based: no governing-body source states them, because no governing body runs your local drop-in.

- **Short shifts, and change on the fly means *now*.** A **shift** is one stint on the ice between substitutions. At drop-in nobody manages your ice time, so a 90-second shift is simply you taking someone else's turn. The mechanics of a change on the fly belong to Team Play and Culture — the essentials are that you head to the bench when the puck is going the other way, you call for your replacement, and the player coming on waits until you are within a stick's length of the boards.
- **Let faster groups play through.** At stick-and-puck especially, where people are working at different speeds and in different directions, look before you cross the ice and do not skate a lap through someone's drill.
- **One person's pucks are one person's pucks.** Collect your own, don't shoot into a group, and never shoot at the far net if someone is standing near it retrieving.
- **Match the intensity to the session, and to the least willing player in the battle.** Most adult drop-in is non-contact by house rule. Even where contact is allowed, nobody at a Tuesday drop-in is being scouted. Body Contact and Battles applies in non-contact leagues too; the legal, useful skills there — angling, stick lifts, body position — are exactly the ones that do not annoy anybody.
- **Pass to the new player.** The person who does this on your first night is the reason you come back, and in a year that person is you.
- **Get off promptly at the buzzer.** Ice time is rented by the minute and the next group is waiting at the gate.
- **Thank the goalie.** Two taps on the pads at the end. They paid the same as you to be shot at.

Afterwards

Get your gear out of the bag as soon as you get home, every time. Equipment owns the drying and maintenance routine and explains why it matters beyond the smell.

8. The minimum equipment to start

Equipment is the authority on the full kit, on fit, on certification standards, and on where to spend and where to save. **Read it before you buy anything.** This section covers only the getting-started question: what do you need on day one, and what can you avoid buying?

What you need to be allowed on the ice

Requirements are set by the session, the league and the governing body, and they differ — which is why Equipment's recurring instruction is to check your own league's requirements before you buy. As a general shape, Hockey Canada's fitting guide lists as required: helmet, mouthguard, neck guard, shoulder pads, elbow pads, gloves, groin protection, hockey pants, shin pads, socks, skates, stick, practice jersey and a bag. **The certification standards that apply to the helmet, cage and neck guard — and which ones are mandatory for whom — are set out in Equipment. Follow that document, not a shop assistant's summary.**

Stick-and-puck sessions often require far less — sometimes only a helmet and gloves. Ask the rink.

What you need to be allowed on the ice in England

England Ice Hockey sets this out itself, and one item on the list is the sharpest difference between British and North American hockey:

- **A neck guard, always, everywhere, at every level.** *"The EIH consider it mandatory that all players at all levels use an approved Ice Hockey Neck Guard/Protector whilst participating in all on ice activities."* Not games — **all on-ice activities**. The In-House Rules go further, making it mandatory for all players in all IIHF categories, with **no warning** before the penalty. If you have learned the game from North American material you will have absorbed the opposite: USA Hockey exempts adults and Hockey Canada's requirement is narrower. **It is not optional for you.** UK and England Rules owns the enforcement detail — what happens if you do not wear one, and what happens if it comes off during play — and Equipment owns which standard the thing has to meet. Read both before you buy one.
- **A cage if you are a junior** — mandatory in all junior games (England Ice Hockey *Rules & Regulations* 24.5) — and **a half visor at minimum** in the recreational and university game in Scotland, and in **all BUIHA (university) games in England and Scotland**. When you are allowed to move to a half visor is a rule with a date attached to it, and it lives in UK and England Rules.
- **Everything conforming to IIHF safety standards**, and everything except gloves, helmets, neck guards and skates *"worn entirely underneath the uniform"* — no elbow pads outside the jersey, no jersey tucked into the shorts, no shorts cut or torn in the thigh.

- **Full equipment, including the helmet, in the pre-game warm-up** — *"must also be worn properly"*, in EIH's words. The warm-up is not a kit-optional period.

Do not treat this as the complete list. It is the set of England-specific amendments EIH publishes on top of the IIHF equipment rules; the base list is the IIHF's, and Equipment is the document that tells you what to buy, how it should fit and what is safe second-hand.

What you can avoid buying at first

- **Programme-supplied kit.** NHL/NHLPA Learn to Play provides *"head-to-toe equipment"*. The First Shift includes *"head-to-toe Bauer equipment"*. Try Hockey For Free sites have loaner gear. For a child's first block, you may need to buy nothing at all.
- **Club loan and hire.** The EIHA states that *"many clubs have equipment available to loan or hire, which means you can try the sport without a significant initial investment."* Equipment's first budget instruction is the same: ask the club first — many associations loan gear and run used-gear swaps, and goalie gear especially is often club-owned.
- **Used gear, selectively.** Equipment sets out exactly what is safe to buy second-hand and what is not. **Its do-not-buy-used list is short, firm, and includes helmets — including hand-me-downs from a sibling.** Do not treat that as a cost-saving opportunity.

The two things to get fitted in person

Skates and helmet. Equipment makes the case at length — the short version is that badly fitting skates make it impossible to learn edges, and you will conclude you have weak ankles when what you have is loose boots. Everything else can be bought online, used, or borrowed.

9. What the first few weeks feel like

Expect to be more tired than you predict. Hockey is intermittent maximal effort, not steady exercise. Conditioning and Recovery owns the numbers: shifts are **30 to 80 seconds** measured, and 30 to 45 seconds when well managed. Your first shifts will be longer than that because you will not yet know when to leave, and that is the single biggest reason new players feel destroyed after twenty minutes.

Expect these specifically:

- **Legs, not lungs, first.** The hockey stance loads quadriceps and hip adductors in a way nothing else does. Groin and adductor complaints are the classic hockey overuse injury —

Conditioning and Recovery covers the management.

- **Cold hands and feet for the first ten minutes, then heat.** Rinks are cold and you will still finish soaked.
- **Sore feet and lace bite** in new skates. Equipment covers break-in and what to do about it.
- **Bruises you do not remember earning**, even in non-contact hockey.
- **A day-two ache in the hip flexors and lower back**, which is the stance, not an injury.

Ramp up gradually. Practice and Development is direct about this: the classic way amateurs get hurt is not contact but a sudden jump in load — nothing for four months, then five sessions in week one.

How long until you are actually playing

Practice and Development owns this question and gives the only honest answer, which is worth carrying with its caveat: published adult-beginner timeframes **come from coaching providers and retailers rather than from research**, and should be read as experienced guesses. One such source offers roughly **6-10 hours of ice time** to go from clinging to the boards to confident forward skating, **3-6 months** from zero to genuinely playing in a beginner league, and **one to two seasons** to comfortable hockey — but **there is no measured evidence behind those figures** and individual variation is enormous.

The framing that document lands on is the useful one: **months for the basics, years for the rest, and the curve is a staircase**. You will feel stuck for three weeks and then improve overnight, repeatedly.

10. How to find out what applies to you

This is the most important section in this document. Registration structures, tier names, fees, session rules and age classifications vary by association and change yearly. Everything above is context; what follows is how you get *your* answer.

Named starting points, as at 27 July 2026

If you are in...	Start here
United States — finding a programme	findhockey.usahockey.com (postcode search for your local association), and USA Hockey's Come Play Youth Hockey page
United States — one-off taster	tryhockeyforfree.com — event map, national dates, loaner-gear information
United States — learn-to-play	learntoplay.nhl.com (locations listed on each NHL club's page) and learntoskateusa.com
United States — registering	membership.usahockey.com
Canada — finding your association and registering	register.hockeycanada.ca/register — Hockey Canada's own association finder. Note its disclaimer: the information " <i>is intended to provide a starting point... and is not necessarily conclusive of where a player is eligible to play</i> "
Canada — the questions parents ask	Hockey Canada's parent FAQ, which is the source for most of section 6 above
Canada — adult	Hockey Canada's Adult Recreational Hockey page and the ASHL
England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland — who to register with	Ice Hockey UK — the single governing body for all four home nations since 30 June 2026. The EIHA's club finder and Registration page still describe the English process, but membership itself moved to IHUK; ring the club and ask which body you are registering with this season
England and Wales — the governance document	England Ice Hockey (englandicehockey.com), whose <i>Rules & Regulations</i> is the source for section 6's English material: registration types, the registration year, insurance, sanctioning and club affiliation. EIH's own contact address in that document is info@englandicehockey.com , IceSheffield, Coleridge Road, Sheffield S9 5DA
England, Scotland and university hockey — the playing rules	The IIHF Official Rule Book , plus the In-House Rules issued jointly by EIH, the SIHA and the BUIHA. UK and England Rules summarises what they change; your section's Rules of Competition , held by your club, covers everything else
England — finding a session at all	Your local rink first, your club second. No governing-body document read for this corpus contains a session finder, a learn-to-skate scheme or a taster calendar for England. The rink sells the ice and knows who is on it
Anywhere else	The IIHF's Member National Associations directory — 84 associations, each linked to its own national body

A caution about links. Governing-body sites reorganise constantly and dead or misleading links are common: usahockey.com/playingrules and usahockey.com/registration both returned 404 on 27 July 2026, several Hockey Canada programme URLs return **HTTP 200 with a 404 page in the body**, and thefirstshift.ca now redirects to an unrelated commercial site. **Navigate from the national body's home page rather than from a remembered URL**, and if a page looks wrong, it is.

The questions to ask, in the order to ask them

Ring the club, the association or the rink. All of these get answered in one call:

1. **What programmes do you run for someone at my level / my child's age, and when does the next one start?**
2. **What does it cost, what does that include, and what is *not* included?** (Ice time, officials, jerseys, tournaments, travel.)
3. **What does registration involve, what documents do I need, and what dates does the membership year run?**
4. **What equipment do I need on day one, and do you loan or hire any of it?**
5. **What level is this session or team, and is there a trial or an assessment?**
6. **How much time is this per week, including travel?**
7. **Is there contact, and what are the house rules?**
8. **What do I need to do as a parent?** (Safeguarding certification, volunteering, driving rota.)

Four more if you are in Britain, each of which has a specific answer that this document cannot give you:

9. **Is this session or league sanctioned, and am I insured in it?** In England, insurance follows sanctioning and nothing else.
10. **Which registration am I buying — Trial, Learn to Play, insurance-only or standard?** They cover different activities and cost different amounts.
11. **Which registration year does it run on, and is any of it pro-rata?** ElH says pro-rata discounts are not available; ask before you pay in April.
12. **Which section's Rules of Competition apply to me, and where do I get them?** That document, not the rulebook, holds your roster sizes, tiering and suspension rules.

And one more, which is the highest-value question in this document: **"I'm completely new — who should I talk to?"** Amateur hockey runs on volunteers who are, in the words of the USA

Hockey Parent Handbook, "*your first point-of-contact for any questions and concerns.*" Someone at every club has the job of answering exactly this, and they want to hear from you.

Common Mistakes

- **Starting with equipment instead of ice.** People kit themselves out completely before their first session and then discover they hate 6am ice. Go to a public skate, then a taster, then buy — and borrow before you buy where the club offers it.
 - **Buying skates online without a fitting.** The single most damaging beginner purchase, and it holds back your skating for as long as you own them. See Equipment.
 - **Turning up to the wrong drop-in.** Advanced drop-in is not a place to learn to stop. Ask what the standard is; rinks run separate sessions precisely so you can choose correctly.
 - **Overestimating your level to avoid embarrassment.** Placing yourself a tier high buys you a season of hanging on and a decent chance of injury. Placing yourself a tier low buys you a season of improving, and moving up is easy.
 - **Assuming registration is a formality.** It is the insurance, the safeguarding and the eligibility. Hockey Canada will strip a child's membership privileges for the season for playing unsanctioned hockey after 30 September.
 - **Missing the registration window.** Youth registration largely happens between April and August for a season starting in September. Deciding in October is late — ring anyway, but expect to be squeezed in.
 - **Budgeting from a number found online.** Fees are set by your local association, and the widely-quoted Hockey Canada average is from a 2011-12 survey. Ask your association for its number.
 - **Taking a 90-second shift at drop-in.** You are not conserving energy, you are taking someone's turn. Short shifts, all night.
 - **Shooting at a goalie who is not looking at you.** The most dangerous common breach of drop-in etiquette, and completely avoidable.
 - **Not asking for help.** New players routinely spend a season guessing at things any teammate would have explained in thirty seconds.
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Key Takeaways

1. **Hockey is administered locally — so the answer to almost every specific question is your association, your club or your rink.** National bodies define registration, insurance and rules; local bodies set fees, tiers, schedules and session rules, and change them yearly.
2. **There is a graded route in, and it starts before hockey.** Public skating or a learn-to-skate class, then a taster (Try Hockey For Free, Esso Fun Days), then a learn-to-play block (NHL/NHLPA Learn to Play at 4–9, The First Shift at 6–10, an adult "hockey 101"), then a team or a league.
3. **Drop-in, stick-and-puck and shinny are conventions, not defined categories.** Before you go, ask three things: what gear is required, what standard the session is, and whether there is contact.
4. **Start a tier below where your ego puts you.** Moving up mid-season is easy and welcomed; moving down is not. Skating is the sorting variable, not shooting.
5. **Registration is insurance, safeguarding and eligibility, not paperwork.** Hockey Canada's plan is \$21.30 per participant per season for \$20 million of liability cover; playing unsanctioned hockey can void a child's membership privileges for the rest of the season.
6. **The membership year is not twelve months from when you pay, and it is not pro-rata.** USA Hockey runs 1 September to 31 August. England Ice Hockey's Rules & Regulations say registrations run **1 August to 31 July**, close on **31 January** except at U10, and that "*pro-rata discounts are not available*" — while the EIHA's Registration page describes the **recreational** section on a 1 October to 30 September insurance year. Ask which one applies to you before you pay — and if you are in Britain, ask twice, because England Ice Hockey and Scottish Ice Hockey memberships ended on 30 June 2026 and are being reissued by Ice Hockey UK.
7. **If you play in Britain, your rulebook is the IIHF's and your rink is probably not NHL-sized.** Every level here runs the IIHF book with domestic amendments on top, so the IIHF divergences flagged throughout are yours, not somebody else's — and IIHF Rule 1.2 permits any sheet from 26 m to 30 m wide, a spread of thirteen feet, with England authorising rinks smaller still. UK and England Rules owns the amendments; Rink Map and Glossary has what the width changes.
8. **In England a neck laceration protector is mandatory for every player, at every level, in all on-ice activity** — England Ice Hockey's own words. USA Hockey exempts adults and Hockey Canada's requirement is narrower; neither exemption is yours. There is no warning before the penalty. See UK and England Rules.

9. **In England, insurance follows sanctioning.** "EIH participants are only insured through EIH insurance when the game or tournament has been sanctioned by EIH" — and playing in a competition EIH or the IIHF does not recognise carries suspension and financial penalties on top. Ask whether the league is sanctioned before you join it.
 10. **Get the time and money commitment in writing before you commit.** Hockey Canada's own estimate spans 3 hours a week for house league to 6–7 plus travel for Rep. Ask what the fee includes — that is USA Hockey's own instruction to parents.
 11. **Arrive early and dressed before the stated time** — 20 to 30 minutes before a practice, 45 to 60 before a game, and a full hour before a genuine first session.
 12. **The etiquette that matters most is other people's safety and other people's ice time:** never shoot at a goalie who is not set, keep shifts short, get out of the way at the end of a drill, and leave the ice promptly at the buzzer.
 13. **Expect months for the basics and years for the rest** — and expect the first three weeks to feel harder than they will ever feel again.
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*A note on what this document does and does not claim: no fee, tier name, programme name or date above is invented. Every specific figure is quoted from the body that published it and carries the date it was retrieved. Where a source publishes a **range** of figures — as the ASHL does for its Hockey 101 blocks — the range is given rather than the most quotable single number, because quoting the cheapest listing as though it were the going rate is its own kind of invention. Where a question genuinely has no general answer — what your association charges, what your rink's drop-in rules are, which tier you belong in — that is stated plainly, along with the page or the person who holds the answer. The drop-in and drill-line etiquette in section 7 is labelled in the text as experience-based: it is close to universal in practice, but no governing body publishes it, because no governing body runs your local drop-in.*

*The same applies to the English material added in sections 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8. It is quoted from England Ice Hockey's own Rules & Regulations and from the In-House Rules, and **three things are stated as absences rather than written around**. EIH's governance document contains **no session finder, no learn-to-skate scheme, no taster calendar and no club directory** — so this document tells you to ring your rink and your NGB instead of inventing one. It **does not publish the registration fee**, which is set annually by its Board, so no fee is given. And it **does not enumerate the documents a player must supply**; the only list found is on the EIHA's Registration web page and is labelled as such. One further uncertainty is flagged in section 1 rather than resolved: the 2024-2025 Rules & Regulations say the Goalkeepers' Restricted Area is*

not currently enforced, while the 2025-26 In-House Rules do not mention it either way, so this document says to ask rather than asserting which is current.
