

Concussions: Caution Is a No-Brainer

It's better to miss a game than a whole season. That's the key message of a campaign by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) aimed at an underrated health threat: sports-related concussions.

Concussions are a traumatic brain injury (TBI) caused by a blow or jolt to the head that causes the soft tissue of the brain to knock against the skull's bony surface. Although they range from mild to severe, they're all serious injuries that can harm the way the brain works. More than 300,000 TBIs occur in U.S. sports and recreation each year, the CDC says. For many of these injuries, the athletes never lose consciousness yet still suffer significant damage.

Concussions can happen to any boy or girl, in any sport, says CDC epidemiologist Julie Gilchrist, M.D. Girls, however, may have a higher rate of post-concussion neurological complications after a concussion than do boys. The short-term effects of a concussion can generate additional problems that may plague a person through life. When young athletes have a flawed memory, Dr. Gilchrist says, "they can have difficulty concentrating in school, relating to kids or sleeping well, and these things can have long-term, devastating consequences."

One grave danger occurs when athletes go back to the game before they fully recover from a concussion. In such a case, even a mild blow can cause second-impact syndrome. That can lead to brain swelling, brain damage and even death. Statistics also show that athletes with a history of concussion are at six times greater risk for another concussion than an athlete with no prior concussion.

Teammates have to keep an eye on each other, Dr. Gilchrist says. Athletes must also let everyone know if they hurt their heads. "You're not helping yourself or your team by hiding it," she says.

She says parents should make sure that children wear the right safety gear during all practices and games and that schools have a concussion plan. If you think your athlete has a concussion, the CDC says:

- Seek medical help at once.
- Bench your child until a health care professional who knows the return-to-play guidelines says it's OK to play.
- Tell all your child's coaches about any recent concussion.

Parents, athletes and coaches can find a free concussion tool kit at this CDC Web site:
http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/tbi/Coaches_Tool_Kit.htm.