

CONCUSSIONS ARE NO LAUGHING MATTER

By: Melissa Jeremiah, RN

Director of Hoosier Uplands Home Health & Hospice

Mild traumatic brain injury, commonly referred to as a concussion, is no laughing matter and can disrupt the way the brain normally works. A concussion can affect schoolwork and other everyday activities. Concussions occur when a person receives a bump, blow or jolt to the head, whether it be from another player during sports, an unpadded goalpost or from a fall. 300,000 sports related head injuries of mild to moderate severity occur in the U.S. each year. The primary sports where concussions may occur are baseball, basketball, field hockey, football, gymnastics, ice hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball, volleyball and wrestling. Once a high school or collegiate athlete has a concussion they are at increased risk of a repeat concussion. A repeat concussion, or second impact syndrome, occurs before the brain has a chance to recover, usually within hours, days or weeks, and may result in brain swelling, permanent brain damage, which can change your whole life and even in rare cases death.

One or more of the following signs and symptoms may indicate a concussion has occurred, although a person can have a concussion and experience no symptoms. Any of the following symptoms should be taken seriously and athletes who experience them should not be allowed to play until cleared by a health professional. Signs observed by coaching staff include: athlete appears dazed or stunned, is confused about assignment, forgets plays, is unsure of game, score or opponent, moves clumsily, answers questions slowly, loses consciousness, shows behavior or personality changes, cannot recall events prior to or after the hit. Symptoms reported by the athlete: nausea, headache, balance problems, dizziness, feels sluggish, foggy or groggy, double or fuzzy vision, sensitivity to light or noise, confusion and concentration or memory problems.

The following are steps a coach can take to protect their players from a concussion:

1. Educate athletes, their parents and your coaching staff of the dangers and potential long-term consequences of concussions.
2. Withhold athletes from play until they are cleared by a health care professional.
3. Take the signs and symptoms of a concussion seriously.
4. Insist that safety comes first. Discourage unsportsmanlike conduct, teach athletes safe playing techniques and make sure your players are wearing the appropriate protective equipment.
5. Teach athletes that it is not smart to play injured. Players, parents and some coaching staff sometimes wrongly believe it shows strength to play injured. You should discourage your coaching staff from pressuring injured athletes to play.
6. Prepare for concussions year-round, educate the players during pre-season, enforce the rules during season, at games and practices and work on ways to decrease injuries during post-season.

The following are steps an athlete can take to protect themselves from a concussion:

1. Follow the coach's rules for safety and the rules of the sport.
2. Practice good sportsmanship at all times.
3. Use proper equipment, such as helmets.
4. Above all else, tell your coaches and your parents if you think you may have a concussion.
5. If you are diagnosed by a health care professional as having a concussion, give yourself time to recover. Tell your coach anytime you experience a concussion, even if it was in another sport.

and especially if it is a repeat concussion, so the coach can take the appropriate steps to keep you safe. Remember it is better to miss one game than a whole season, or the rest of your sports career.

Research for this article was obtained with the assistance of the CDC at www.cdc.gov.