

Get Your Head Out of the Game: The Dangers of Sports Concussion

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From segments on sports shows to stories on the front page of the newspaper, sports concussions are a hot topic these days. And, while media-declared “epidemics” are sometimes more hype than substance (think avian bird flu), greater attention to sports concussions is long overdue.

Concussions make up more than 10 percent of all high school sports injuries, and we also see them from car accidents, falls and on-the-job injuries. A concussion can happen with any blow to the head that alters how the brain functions, but it can also occur with an injury to another part of the body if the right force is transmitted to the brain. The resulting concussion is due to changes on a cellular level. Put simply, the brain will not work correctly if it is concussed. Structurally, a concussed brain is not affected, so imaging tests like CT scans and MRIs will not show any damage. Nonetheless, a concussed brain does not function the way it did before the injury.

Concussion symptoms range from headache and dizziness (the two most common symptoms) to many other potential symptoms, including nausea, light or noise sensitivity, difficulty concentrating and even mood changes. Contrary to popular belief, loss of consciousness (also known as “getting knocked out”) is actually not seen that often with concussions. In fact, only about one in 10 people will lose consciousness when they suffer a concussion. Because concussion symptoms are so commonly misunderstood, something an athlete may consider a minor injury can result in weeks to months of symptoms. In addition, the severity of concussions is difficult to predict without the help of an expert.

Because each concussion is different, any suspected concussion injury should be medically evaluated – and the sooner the better, even if it involves going to the hospital emergency room. The best words of wisdom I can give to any parent, coach or athlete are: “When in doubt, hold the athlete out.” Let an expert evaluate the athlete, and don’t ignore his or her symptoms. Returning to play or work too soon can lead to a worse injury and can even be fatal due to something called second impact syndrome (SIS), which is brain swelling with a second head injury before the first concussion has healed.

In order to avoid SIS and post-concussion syndrome (symptoms that can persist weeks or months after the injury), it is important to know when it is safe for an athlete to return to play or a worker to return to the workforce – a decision that can only be made by a doctor. Determining when it is safe to return to play or work takes a thorough history review and physical examination as well as balance assessments and computerized concussion testing when appropriate. The expertise and experience of a doctor specializing in concussions is particularly important for athletes who have short seasons and want to return as quickly as possible. Athletes are some of my favorite patients because of how motivated and driven they are, but sometimes, I have to protect them from themselves when it comes to concussions.

Dr. Warren is a board-certified sports medicine and family physician and medical director of the Presbyterian Sports Medicine program in Union County Public Schools. He also cares for patients at Waxhaw Family Physicians & Sports Medicine Center. To learn more about Dr. Warren or his practice, visit www.waxhawfamilyphysicians.com.