

Back to school, back to sports injuries

When students return to school and organized sports, concerns about symptoms that could mean head and neck injuries should be parental priorities.

As a part of Neurosurgery Outreach Month in August, Dr. Evan M. Packer recently talked about safe ways for children to take part in sports by identifying symptoms and preventing sports injuries.

Dr. Packer is a partner in the Brain and Spine Center South Florida in Boca Raton. He also treats patients and covers trauma cases at Delray Medical Center and performs surgery at Boca Raton Regional Hospital and the hospital's Marcus Neuroscience Institute. He is a diplomate of the American Board of Neurological Surgery, a fellow of the American College of Surgeons, and affiliate assistant professor at the Charles E. Schmidt College of Medicine at Florida Atlantic University.

What did you see in your practice in youth sports injuries last school year? Was there anything new?

Injuries are pretty typical, but there's more awareness with concussions in the media. We still see kids' sports injuries at school, and they come to the trauma center [Delray Medical Center is one of two Level I Trauma Centers for **Palm Beach County**. The other is St. Mary's Medical Center.]

Sometimes we see them in the office and they have injury to the head and spine and any type of trauma from contact sports. Injuries are pretty consistent across the board. As a neurosurgeon, I'm seeing concussion and soft-tissue neck and spine injuries. Very rarely

fractures and bleeding in the brain, also less common for the sports injury we see. A lot of times, a pediatrician may call me.

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Do the symptoms always present as sports injuries?

The takeaway is, if parents are suspicious of any injuries, they should get it checked out. If a patient is symptomatic, you can't ignore that. That's what's different than in the past. We're more focused on the symptoms because they're recognized more.

Should parents prevent their children from playing contact sports?

There is still a hesitancy of parents about playing some sports like football, but I think sports are safe if the right precautions are taken. There's danger in anything and you can't prevent everything. There's always a risk in high-contact sports, but awareness and use of protective gear can mitigate it.

By the time you see an injured child, isn't it too late?

If somebody has symptoms, you don't return them to sports and they have to pass a concussion protocol. There's a sports trainer in the schools. I'm not at the scene.

Do you see those children?

I do see these patients, but I'm not a concussion doctor. The injuries aren't just coming from sports. They can come from riding a bike or skateboard and they need a helmet.

What do you tell parents about prevention?

Two things: use of safety equipment and helmets for regular activities. Avoidance is difficult, but if an injury does occur, don't return directly to sports. That will prevent a secondary injury that would be a more significant injury.

What about doing more sports or more intensive sports?

How physically able is their child to move to the next level? They have to understand the risks and have an open conversation with their kids. Make them say if they have headaches, dizziness, lethargy, nausea, vertigo, or if they have severe neck or back pain or tingling in the arms or burning pain in the arms or legs. Then they need medical attention. Have that conversation.