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Preventing Sports-Related Head Injuries in Children and Teens

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As the fall sports season kicks into action, it's important for parents to understand how to prevent concussions and reduce the risk of other head and neck injuries in kids. An estimated 1.6 to 3.8 million adults, teens and children suffer sports-related concussions each year, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. However, the actual number could be double or triple that figure, since many athletes and parents don't go to a doctor for treatment.

If your child plays football, hockey, lacrosse or soccer, be sure the coach is committed to safety and follows athletic association guidelines related to concussions. [The ThinkFirst National Injury Prevention Foundation \(http://www.thinkfirst.org\)](http://www.thinkfirst.org) has developed a program to educate coaches, athletes and parents about brain and spinal cord injuries.

If your child is hit on the head or neck at a football game or other team sport, be sure to have the athletic trainer or coach pay immediate attention to the injury, even if it appears to be mild. If the young athlete appears confused, dizzy, vomits, complains of a bad headache or has blurry vision, go to the hospital right away so a doctor can perform a more thorough examination.

Reducing the risks

One of the most important ways to reduce the risk of a concussion or other brain injury is to wear an appropriate helmet when bicycling, horseback riding, rollerblading or playing sports. Be sure the helmet is the proper size, as your child may have outgrown last year's safety equipment. But don't buy a helmet that's too large, since it won't cushion the brain from hitting the skull in a sudden impact.

Take a look at your child's shoes and other athletic gear as well. Wearing a shoe that's the wrong fit or has improperly sized cleats increases the risk of tripping on the turf and striking the head on the ground. Understanding the rules of the game and practicing good sportsmanship can also reduce the likelihood of a sports-related injury.

As a parent, you can serve as a role model for safety in recreational activities, while protecting against brain and spinal cord injuries. Always wear a helmet when riding a bicycle, motorcycle or all-terrain vehicle (ATV), and keep a close eye on a young child who is learning to ride.

Remember that even low-traffic streets can be slippery with unexpected hazards for bicyclists, while off-road conditions can be rough and bumpy. So, be sure your child's head is well protected in case of a fall.

Treating a head injury

If your son or daughter complains of a headache after being hit on the head, an over-the-counter pain reliever, such as acetaminophen, can be helpful. Don't give aspirin, though, because it can increase the risk of bleeding. Helping your child stay quiet and relaxed can also help with managing head pain.

Keep a close eye on your child even if there are no signs of a problem. That's because the symptoms of a concussion may not appear for several days. If your child becomes forgetful or confused, or has difficulty sleeping or concentrating, see your doctor right away for an evaluation.

A serious concussion or other type of traumatic brain injury requires careful management to help your child return to normal activities as quickly as possible and reduce the possibilities of long-term problems. A physician can advise you on follow-up care, including whether or not it's safe for your child to return to the playing field.

There are certainly many health benefits to staying physically active, especially if your child loves a certain sport. But you may not want to expose your child to the risk of another concussion that could lead to a permanent brain injury. That might mean changing to a non-contact sport or recreational activity with fewer injury risks. In any case, your doctor can help you find the right balance for your child.

Evan M. Packer, MD, is one of Palm Beach County's most respected neurosurgeons with a comprehensive practice in brain and spinal surgery. A board-certified specialist, Dr. Packer regularly diagnoses and treats a wide range of neurological conditions at the Brain and Spine Center in Boca Raton.

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