

A heady topic – the short and long-term dangers of concussion



SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

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Concussion is a troublesome and controversial health and safety topic in the sport world.

Today's sport medicine practitioners, family physicians and coaching and training staff should all be educated on its dangers, including prevention, symptoms and return to play protocols.

Unfortunately, even for those who are educated – and many are not – the drive to win, to get the athlete back out playing, and other social pressures often rule over common sense and health and safety.

The days of shaking off “getting your bell rung” are gone, or at least, they should be. Those “dings” of the past, were – and still are – a concussion in the future.

Many myths still exist surrounding concussion. Even today, with more avenues for training and education, far too many hockey coaches, trainers, parents and players ignore symptoms, minimize or act in denial of evidence to the contrary, and put young players at risk.

In 2001, the First International Conference on Concussion in Sport was held in Vienna. A second conference was held in Prague in 2004. Canadian concussion specialist Dr. James Kissick reported in the *Family Physician* that an international group of concussion experts, The Concussion in Sport Group, prepared a statement and compiled recommendations for health professionals caring for athletes with concussions.

These recommendations came about following the conferences sponsored by the International Ice Hockey Federation, FIFA (International Soccer), and the International Olympic Committee Medical Commission. Here are some key current concepts in concussion management as suggested by Dr. Kissick:

- Concussion can have multiple symptoms and signs that evolve over time, including physical, such as headache, nausea, imbalance; cognitive, memory, concentration alteration, for example; and emotional, including mood change manifestations.

Remember – you do not have to lose consciousness to have a concussion! This is perhaps the biggest misconception and mistake made in diagnosis of concussion.

- It is absolutely unsafe to return to play while symptomatic in any way following a concussion. Symptomatic people are far more likely to be concussed again, to be concussed more easily, and to have post-concussion symptoms that are more severe and long-lasting. This is a very common reason for patients I see to have a prolonged post-concussion course.
- Return to play should follow a stepwise progression. Athletes should rest until asymptomatic, then start with very light aerobic activity, and progress gradually toward participation if asymptomatic. This progression will vary depending on the duration of post-concussion symptoms and the type of sport being played.
- Prevention. Family physicians are in an ideal position to advocate for safe participation in sport, including proper use of helmets. Like me, Dr. Kissick hopes physicians will be called upon more often to “clear” athletes for return to play after concussion (Hockey Canada applauded the bold move by the Greater Toronto Hockey League that now requires a doctor's certificate for return to play following a concussion).

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According to neurosurgeon Dr. Charles Tator, President of Think First Canada, “it will save brains.” If we are to provide safe and healthy environments for our kids playing hockey, it will take educated trainers, coaches, parents and athletes to support these guidelines and prevention strategies.

Many sports and leagues are now using baseline cognitive skills testing programs with their athletes. These systems have athletes complete a series of exercises on a computer, where the system tabulates their results and stores them as a reference.

When or if the athlete is concussed, they can then use the same testing program to see where the athlete is in terms of cognitive functioning.

In my practice in a sport injury clinic, I see many concussions in the course of a year but perhaps most troubling is the athlete who is now so debilitated from “post-concussion syndrome” that he or she is unable to function for long periods of time following a concussion – and in some cases, never fully recovers.

The fallout from the concussion – headaches, lack of focus, fatigue, nausea, sleeping difficulties and depression – can last for years, and even a lifetime.

Let's all be part of concussion prevention and proper management of our concussed athletes. Speak up and be a child's advocate. We're all part of the education process.

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