

Concussions in Young Athletes

Know the signs and when to seek medical attention

By Michelle Porter Tiernan

Back to school for kids isn't just about hitting the books. It can also mean taking a hit when playing football, soccer and other sports. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates about 2 million children each year get a concussion—a direct blow to the head or indirect blow to the body that causes the brain to literally shift in the skull. While most concussions are mild, they are serious injuries that require medical treatment.

Symptoms of Concussion

Concussions in kids can happen at all ages. “For younger children, a concussion can happen during a playground or bicycle accident,” said Aaron Vaughan, MD, a primary care sports medicine specialist at Mission Sports Medicine and MAHEC (Mountain Area Health Education Center). “Older children and teens often get concussions while playing contact sports like football, soccer, rugby and hockey.”

Meghan Ledford, 17, has had five concussions while playing basketball in high school. “The fifth one was the most severe,” she said. “I was elbowed in the head and fell to the ground. I couldn't concentrate well, had a headache and was sensitive to light.”

When it comes to concussion, everyone is affected differently, said Dr. Vaughan. “Symptoms can range from a headache, nausea, dizziness and blurred vision to difficulty remembering information or concentrating. Emotional issues can include feeling down or anxious,” he said.

“After my fifth concussion, my mom went with me to see Dr. Vaughan,” said Ledford. “I took the ImPACT test online and kept retaking it as part of my treatment. It took a week before I had no more symptoms.”

Preventing Concussions

Helmets cannot prevent concussions, although they can help prevent other injuries, said Dr. Vaughan. “Staying hydrated can potentially help protect the brain. Think of an egg inside a jar—without water, it will hit the jar with more impact, but water can help minimize the blow,” he said.

Delaying when kids are exposed to high-impact sports is another way to reduce risk of concussion, said Dr. Vaughan. The greater number of impacts, the more likelihood a child is to have an injury.

“Parents should know that concussions are common and be aware of the red flags—drowsiness, vomiting, change in alertness and a headache that gets worse or doesn't go away,” said Dr. Vaughan. “It's important to seek medical attention for their child immediately.” ■

Concussions and ImPACT®

Mission Sports Medicine employs athletic trainers on-site at sports events to evaluate young athletes. Before the season starts, young athletes take a computerized test called ImPACT® (Immediate Post-Concussion Assessment and Cognitive Testing) to assess their baseline memory and reaction time. Pre- and post-tests (after a concussion has occurred) are compared to track a patient's progress with their recovery.



Aaron Vaughan, MD, is a primary care sports medicine specialist at Mission Sports Medicine and MAHEC. (828) SPORTS-1 (776-7871)



If you think your child may have a concussion, call 828-SPORTS-1 or visit missionsportsmedicine.org.