Concussion Reports for Young Athletes Nearly Tripled Since 1997

On behalf of Johnston, Moore & Thompson

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A recent study in the medical journal Pediatrics showed that concussions among children aged 8 to 19 who were involved in organized sports had nearly tripled between 1997 and 2007. The findings may suggest the intensity of kids' sports has increased dramatically or indicate a greater awareness that concussions require medical treatment, or both.

The study found that 14- to 19-year-olds were taken to the emergency room for concussions more than three times as often in 2007 (nearly 22,000 times) than they had been in 1997 (about 7,000 times). Concussion-related ER visits doubled for those aged 8 to 13, from about 3,800 in 1997 to almost 8,000 in 2007.

Concussions are a form of brain injury, but until recently they had not been thought likely to create long-term problems for their sufferers. In the past, many athletes had been told simply to "tough it out" when they received a hard blow to the head during a game.

In the past few years, there has been a growing body of evidence that certain concussions, known as "mild traumatic brain injury," may post long-term problems. Also, repeated concussions may have a cumulative effect.

Sports injuries among the young can be particularly troubling because they could mean a lifetime of functional or cognitive limitations. Additionally, the mild brain injuries seen from concussions can be difficult to recognize, and getting active young people to comply with the treatment can be a challenge.

Many Parents and Coaches Don't Understand How Serious a Concussion Can Be

A concussion occurs when the brain has been jostled. Generally, the person suffers a sharp blow to the head but doesn't lose consciousness, and the damage is too small to show up on medical imaging scans. However, the damage to the brain is real.

The symptoms can include anything from a headache to dizziness, nausea and trouble concentrating. The symptoms may last around a week, but the brain may require months to heal.

The treatment for a concussion is rest -- both physical and mental. The patient needs to avoid any physical activities that could further damage the brain or prevent it from healing, but they also need to avoid mental tasks that require concentration and focus.

The mental rest can be particularly challenging for young people. It can mean being restricted from watching TV, playing video games, reading and using the computer. However, failure to comply with this rest period could lead to permanent brain injury, chronic pain, memory problems and learning difficulties.

Worse, a second concussion while the first is still healing could be deadly.

"They want to know if they can play tomorrow, and you're just like, 'No!'" says the study's lead author, Dr. Lisa Bakhos. "It's not just as simple as get up, shake it off and you'll be fine.

Many patients -- along with coaches and parents -- dismiss concussions as "not a big deal," says co-author Dr. Kevin Walter. "In my mind, how the hell can a brain injury not be a big deal?"

Many researchers believe that young people may be more vulnerable than adults to permanent brain injuries after a concussion because their brains are still developing. At the same time, young athletes are increasingly under pressure to practice year-round, a trend that increases the chances for a head injury.

Because of recent headlines about permanent brain injuries being found in professional athletes known to have experienced multiple concussions, a number of states and youth sports organizations have been looking into the issue.

Source:

"ER visits for concussions soar among kid athletes" (Associated Press, August 30, 2010)