

Sports-Related Concussions

Local physicians raise awareness to help young athletes

When Dr. Sandeep Kunwar met a famous pro football player who had recently retired from the San Francisco 49ers, he asked the Super Bowl-winning, Pro Football Hall of Fame member why he retired in the prime of his career.

“He responded that he had made a conscious decision to step down in order to avoid any further concussion injuries,” recalls Dr. Kunwar, a neurosurgeon and medical co-director of the Taylor McAdam Bell Neuroscience Institute at Washington Hospital. “He recognized that there could be serious complications of repetitive concussions — including permanent brain changes that could drastically impact his health and quality of life, and that might even be life-threatening.”

Since that time, awareness of dangerous sports-related traumatic head injuries including concussions has increased dramatically, especially among professional athletic organizations. More work in raising awareness and preventing such injuries is still needed, however, particularly among younger amateur athletes.

“I applaud the professional sports organizations for creating greater awareness of concussions, which are serious injuries that certainly deserve more attention,” says Dr. Russell Nord, an orthopedic surgeon and medical director of the Washington Township Orthopedic Surgery and Sports Medicine Center.

“This increased awareness is becoming more common in college, high school and community



Sports medicine physicians Dr. Sandeep Gupta (center) and Dr. Russell Nord encourage athletes to be evaluated immediately by a physician if they have suffered a direct blow to the head, face or neck.

Symptoms of concussion might include:

- Headache or a sense of pressure in the head.
- Feeling in a “fog” or confused.
- Signs of memory loss or amnesia.
- Dizziness or trouble with balance.
- Slowed physical reaction times.

league sports as well. It’s very important that we continue to promote concussion prevention in young athletes.”

A study by the American Association of Neurological Surgeons (AANS) estimates there were nearly 447,000 sports-related head injuries treated in U.S. hospital emergency rooms in 2009.

“I once treated a school mascot for a concussion,” says Dr. Nord. “It’s important to recognize that it’s not just football. You can get a concussion in any sporting activity. And it’s not just a ‘male’ injury; females are also at risk for concussions.”

In fact, a clinical report issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics states that girls are reported to have a higher rate of concussion than boys in similar sports. In girls’ sports, the rate of concussion is highest in soccer and basketball.

“Girls and women have three times the risk of concussion than males in basketball and soccer,” Dr. Kunwar says. “We’re not sure of all the

reasons why this is the case, but it may be partly because females generally have longer, thinner necks and weaker neck muscles than males. Having a thick, muscular neck makes you somewhat less likely to suffer a concussion.”

What Is a Concussion?

“Generally speaking, a concussion is a traumatic injury to the brain that causes temporary loss of normal brain function,” says Dr. Sandeep Gupta, a colleague of Dr. Nord’s who is board-certified in both family medicine and sports medicine. “It can be caused by a direct blow to the head, face or neck that results in rapid onset of short-lived impairment of neurological function. It may or may not involve loss of consciousness. If the injured person does lose consciousness or has any serious symptoms, he or she should be evaluated by a physician who has experience in dealing with concussions.” ♦

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