Tackling Risks of Concussion Head-On

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I grew up a diehard Denver Broncos fan. I proudly wear the orange and blue and rarely miss a game. So it was a no-brainer for me to introduce my two sons to football when they were about two days old. We would watch together, cheer together, and boo together. It was a true family affair, hot wings and all.

Still, I wasn’t prepared for the day when, at the ages of 10 and 8, they proclaimed their interest in playing. As much as I love watching football, I wasn’t sure I wanted my boys to play for fear of concussion and other serious injuries.

But as I learned about the preventive measures schools and coaches are taking across the state to protect kids from concussion, I became more comfortable with the idea. Here’s what I learned:

- The Montana Legislature passed the Dylan Steigers Protection of Youth Athletes Act in 2013. This law requires coaches and officials to get annual training on how to prevent and identify concussions; parents to read and sign a document educating them about the risks, signs, and symptoms; coaches to remove student athletes from the field if they show any signs of concussion; and athletes to get a doctor’s release before playing again if they take a blow to the head.

- Starting in fifth grade, Small Fry Football coaches teach athletes to tackle in a way that prevents head-to-head contact. No such contact is tolerated.

- This season, St. Peter’s Health donated 450 Guardian Caps, which are placed over the helmets of players in fifth through eighth grade during practice to protect and prevent head injuries.

With well-informed parents, strong laws and policies, highly trained coaches and officials, and incredible community partners, young athletes can participate in a wide variety of sports more safely.

Risks of Concussion

A concussion is a type of traumatic brain injury caused by a bump, blow, or jolt to the head. It can change the way your brain normally works.
Concussions can occur in any sport or recreational activity, including soccer, hockey, basketball, snowboarding, bicycling, sledding, ATM riding, and even playground activities, just to name a few. Among older people, falls are the most common cause.

Most people who have a concussion recover quickly and completely. But for some, symptoms can last days, weeks, or even longer, and the effects can be serious. Recovery may be slower among older adults, young children, and teens.

Individuals who have suffered a concussion may be as much as four times more likely to experience head injuries in the future. After the first concussion, it takes less of a blow to cause injury and takes longer for a person to recover.

As a public health professional, I routinely promote the many health benefits of physical activity, so the last thing I want is to discourage people from participating safely in sports and recreation.

The fact is, nearly every activity involves some risk. The key in this case is to find ways to prevent head trauma and to respond quickly and properly when such injuries occur.

I applaud organized sports for tackling the risks of concussion head on. But many youth and adults are involved in non-school sports leagues and noncompetitive recreational activities. Doing so safely will always be at least partly the responsibility of individuals, coaches, officials, and parents.

**Preventing Concussions**

To reduce the risk of concussion, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend that parents and athletes:

- Find out if their school or league has a concussion policy and what it says.
- Make safety the first priority in any sport or activity.
- Teach and practice safe playing techniques (like tackling in football without hard head-to-head contact).
- Follow the rules of play and encourage good sportsmanship and strict officiating.
- Use or require the right protective equipment for the activity (such as a helmet or seat belt), and make sure it’s well-maintained, worn correctly, and fits properly.
- Make sure you (or your players) are fit and well-conditioned. Find out if any of your athletes has ever had a concussion.
- Accept and teach that it’s not smart to play sports with a concussion. Don’t foster a “tough-it-out mentality” that pressures injured athletes to play. Rest is crucial after a concussion. Anyone suspected of having a brain injury should not return to play until evaluated by an experienced health-care provider.
- Learn more about concussion, including its signs and symptoms and how to respond. The CDC has a great website aimed at parents, coaches, trainers, athletes, and others at [https://www.cdc.gov/headsup/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/headsup/index.html)
- Learn about the efforts of the Montana High School Association policies and procedures at [https://www.mhsa.org/sportsmed](https://www.mhsa.org/sportsmed)
- Reduce your risk of falls. Check out the tips at [https://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalsafety/falls/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/homeandrecreationalsafety/falls/index.html)