

Heads Up! Play It Safe When It Comes to Concussions

Radio Interview with Dr. Julie Gilchrist, CDC

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC- safer, healthier, people.

[Rob Dalt] Hi I am Rob Dalt and joining us today is Dr. Julie Gilchrist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Injury Center. Hello, Dr. Gilchrist.

[Julie Gilchrist] Hello.

[Rob Dalt] Thank you for joining us to day.

[Julie Gilchrist] Thanks for having me.

[Rob Dalt] What is a concussion?

[Julie Gilchrist] Well, concussions are also known as a mild traumatic brain injuries, can be caused by a bump or blow to the head or body and it causes the brain to move about inside the skull. Concussion can change the way the brain normally works. And even a "ding," or sometimes people say "getting your bell rung," or what seems to be a mild bump or blow can be serious. Concussions can occur in any sport or recreational activity.

[Rob Dalt] What are the signs and symptoms of a concussion?

[Julie Gilchrist] Well, there are lots of them and coaches or parents may observe many different signs that can indicate that an athlete has sustained a concussion. The athlete can appear dazed or confused. They can forget sports plays. They can be unsure of the score or who they are playing. They may stumble or move clumsily. They could answer the questions slowly. They could even lose consciousness (even briefly). Sometimes they show behavior or personality changes, and they may not recall events around the time of the hit or fall. And these are the signs. Symptoms can include headaches, blurred vision, and a whole host of different symptoms.

Signs and symptoms of a concussion can last from several minutes to days, weeks, months, or even longer in some cases. So it is important to recognize the signs and symptoms and see a health care provider right away.

[Rob Dalt] Who would you say is at most risk for sports- and recreation-related concussion?

[Julie Gilchrist] Concussions are commonly reported injuries in children and adolescents who participate in sports and recreational activities. An estimated 135,000 sports- and recreation-related traumatic brain injuries (including concussions), are treated in U.S. hospital emergency departments each year in children ages 5 to 18 years.

The greatest number of TBI-related emergency department visits for these children resulted from bicycling, football, basketball, playground activities, and soccer. But these are also common activities with many participants, so we can't say that they are the riskiest.

[Rob Dalt] Alright.

[Julie Gilchrist] We don't have participation information to directly compare activities, but we can compare the proportion of all injuries seen in emergency departments for an activity that are related to traumatic brain injury. For instance, one tenth of all injuries in horseback riding that were treated in the emergency department involved traumatic brain injury. Other activities with a high proportion of TBI among kids included ice skating, riding all-terrain vehicles, hockey, and tobogganing or sledding.

[Rob Dalt] As a coach or parent if you witness what you think is a concussion, how soon can an athlete return-to-play following a concussion?

[Julie Gilchrist] Well, an athlete with a concussion should not return to play until a health care professional with experience in evaluating for concussion says it's OK. Athletes who return to play too soon—while their brain is still healing from a concussion—risk having a second concussion. Second concussions can be very serious. They can cause permanent brain damage and affect a child for a lifetime.

[Rob Dalt] I understand that, but what are the long-term effects of a concussion?

[Julie Gilchrist] Well, traumatic brain injuries can cause a wide range of functional changes which can affect thinking, language, learning, emotions, behavior, and even how you feel things or sensations. Even relatively mild brain injuries can result in health consequences such as impaired thinking, memory problems, and emotional or behavioral changes. And again, athletes who return to play too soon put themselves at increased risk for very severe Second Impact Syndrome or a second concussion.

[Rob Dalt] You talk about second time concussions, but initially how can concussion be prevented?

[Julie Gilchrist] Well it can be a little different for every sport, but there are steps that can be taken to protect youth from concussion. First, you want to ensure athletes follow their coach's rules for safety and the rules of the sport. You want to encourage athletes to practice good sportsmanship at all times. Make sure they wear the right protective equipment for their activity, (equipment such as helmets, padding, and eye and mouth guards can help). Protective equipment should fit properly, be well maintained, and be worn consistently and correctly. Finally, if you learn the signs and symptoms of a concussion that will help in ensuring that you will respond appropriately if someone sustains a concussion.

[Rob Dalt] What is CDC doing to help prevent sports- and recreation-related concussion?

[Julie Gilchrist] Well, CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control has developed "Heads Up: Concussion in Youth Sports." It's a free tool kit to help youth sports coaches, administrators, parents, and even the athletes recognize the signs and symptoms of a concussion and respond to concussions appropriately.

[Rob Dalt] That is a great idea. What is included in CDC's new tool kit for coaches, "Heads Up: Concussion in Youth Sports?"

[Julie Gilchrist] The tool kit contains: a fact sheet for coaches and a specific fact sheet for athletes and for parents each in English and Spanish; it has clipboard with concussion facts right on the back so coaches can have it right at hand; and also a magnet with facts for coaches and parents. It has poster that coaches can use in their office or if they have concession stand anyplace where people can see it, and finally a quiz for anyone who is using the tool kit to test their concussion knowledge.

[Rob Dalt] That's a lot of great information. How do you get a copy of the tool kit and can anyone order it?

[Julie Gilchrist] Anyone can order it and it can be ordered by visiting CDC's website at: www.cdc.gov/ConcussionInYouthSports — all one word. And all materials can also be directly downloaded in both English and Spanish directly from the website.

[Rob Dalt] Downloading makes it easy, but is there any cost for ordering the tool kit?

[Julie Gilchrist] No, it is free.

[Rob Dalt] That's great. Why is this information important so information to the CDC?

[Julie Gilchrist] More than 38 million boys and girls participate in organized youth sports in the U.S.A today. We know that youth sports coaches and administrators are eager to keep their athletes safe and healthy. That is why CDC wants to equip coaches and administrators with the "Heads Up: Concussion in Youth Sports." Coaches are on the front line in the effort to identify and respond to concussions and they will play an important role in sharing this information with athletes and parents. Because of this we, we are sending these tool kits to youth sports administrators and organizations and urging them to order a kit for all the coaches in their leagues.

[Rob Dalt] Dr. Julie Gilchrist. Thank you.

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