

## FITNESS

PART ONE OF A TWO-PART SERIES

**SPORT CONCUSSIONS:** *What they are and how to identify them*

By Keri A. Stokes, MS, LAT, ATC, LMT



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It shouldn't be news to those in the sports community that concussions and head injuries played a major role in the deaths of two North Carolina high school athletes over a two-month span back in 2008. Still, not every high school in the state is yet required to employ a full-time athletic trainer. On top of that, the majority of our youth athletes play for an endless number of community sports leagues around the state that also don't provide proper medical coverage by a licensed and certified athletic trainer. So what do we do when the first line of defense is thrown out of the game? We bring in the second string. And who better to place in this role than parents.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recently launched a program called "Heads Up" in hopes of educating players, parents and coaches on how to help take concussions out of play. The "Heads Up" Program has simply defined a concussion as "a brain injury...caused by a bump, blow or jolt to the head...that can range from mild to severe and disrupt the way the brain normally works." This means that no direct blow to the head is necessary for a concussion to occur so just because your football player doesn't hit helmets with his opponent or your soccer player doesn't hit her head on the ground after a hard tackle does not mean that they may not have sustained a concussion injury. Any physical force that causes the brain to rapidly accelerate and decelerate in a brief period of time can result in a concussion.

So that means that every time your child bumps his head or gets hit, he has a concussion, right? WRONG! Experts say that it is very possible for athletes to hurt their heads or get hit and not have a concussion. So how do we as sports medicine professionals tell the difference? We are trained to treat each athlete and each incident individually through a very thorough and systematic assessment and evaluation that takes place over time. Just like no two athletes are the same, no two concussions are the same either. Many of you, as parents, may not be medically trained to evaluate and treat sports injuries but that doesn't mean you can't be educated on what to look for or how to respond when it is your child that gets hurt.

**THE COLD-HARD FACTS:**

Sport concussions have been coined the "silent epidemic" because more times than not they go undetected or unreported. This isn't really a surprise due to the "no pain, no gain" attitude that has spread like wildfire across both male and female youth sports in recent years. Ironically, "dumb jocks" aren't so dumb when it comes to knowing how their coaches, parents or teammates may respond if they report an injury or the inability to play. This results in too many athletes keeping injuries, especially head injuries, and their severity, a secret. Also, in high schools that have an athletic trainer, athletes sometimes fail to report their head injuries due to the stricter guidelines for return-to-play. The CDC estimates that between 1.6 and 3.8 million sports-related concussions occur each year and that over 50% of concussions may go unreported. Concussions don't discriminate when it comes to gender, age, ability or ethnic background. Research reports that the higher-risk sports include football, boys and girls soccer, hockey, wrestling and lacrosse but that still doesn't exempt any kid.

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR:**

Experts say that a concussion is a functional, not structural injury so unlike a torn ACL or a broken wrist a concussion will almost never show up on any of the usual X-rays, CT scans or MRI scans. So how can you tell if your child is suffering from a concussion? The following are a list of the most common signs and symptoms found with a concussion injury:

- Headache
- Blurred vision
- Ringing in the ears
- Nausea, vomiting
- Sensitivity to light
- Tenderness or neck pain
- Numbness or weakness
- Funny taste in the mouth
- Confusion, feeling "foggy"
- Amnesia/memory problems
- Attention/concentration issues
- Balance or coordination problems
- Irritability/emotionality
- Drowsiness or changes in sleep patterns
- Loss of consciousness\*  
(\*usually results in a referral to the emergency room)

You know your child best so use your best

judgment when determining the severity of the signs and symptoms. Most kids will tell you that they are fine or asymptomatic so it is up to you to decide whether or not they are telling the truth. Any unusual or out of character behavior following a head injury should be taken seriously. It is not uncommon for athletes who sustain a concussion to have problems concentrating on everyday tasks at home, on the field and in the classroom. Teachers and coaches should be made aware of the situation so that they can best help accommodate the student-athlete if it's necessary.

PART TWO of this series will be featured in the July-August issue of SportsKidsPlay® newspaper and will discuss the treatment of sport concussion injuries and the dangers of Second Impact Syndrome (SIS).

Keri A. Stokes is a Sport & Exercise Psychology Consultant, a Certified Athletic Trainer, and a Licensed Massage Therapist at The Sports Medicine and Orthopaedics Center in Greensboro. If you have questions, concerns or comments regarding concussions or head injuries, please feel free to email the author at [k.stokes@sosbonedocs.com](mailto:k.stokes@sosbonedocs.com). More educational information on traumatic brain injuries and the "Heads Up" program is available from the CDC website: <http://www.cdc.gov/traumaticbraininjury/>.

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