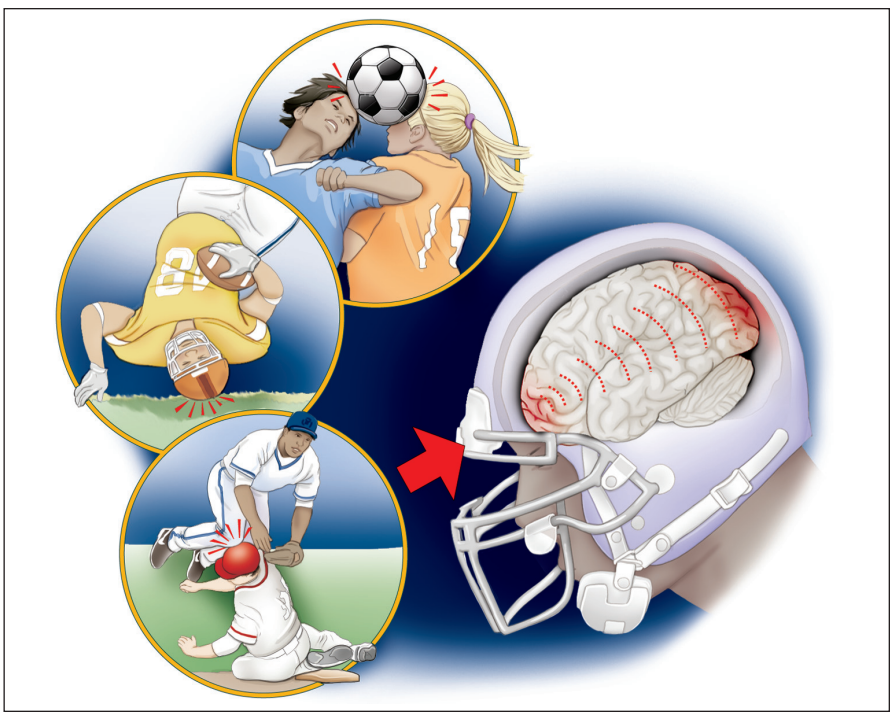
Concussions

An Underdiagnosed Problem for Athletes?

J Orthop Sports Phys Ther 2012;42(7):633. doi:10.2519/jospt.2012.0506

A concussion is a mild traumatic brain injury that is caused by a sudden blow or jolt to the head. This can happen during sport or recreation, when a player's head hits another person, the ground, or sporting equipment. Some people try to "tough it out" and return to play after being injured. However, ignoring symptoms of a concussion and continuing to play after receiving a blow or jolt to the head can be dangerous, make symptoms worse, and delay recovery. Repeated concussions can lead to a longer recovery and may result in long-term problems. Screening tools include checklists of symptoms or quick tests that can help detect a concussion. A study published in the July 2012 issue of *JOSPT* used these screening tools to measure changes in player function both before and after a football season.



CONCUSSIONS. A concussion can occur during sport or recreation, when a player's head hits another person, the ground, or sporting equipment. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states, "All concussions are serious. Don't hide it, report it. Take time to recover." If you suspect you have had a concussion, seek an evaluation from a healthcare provider before returning to sports.

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This *JOSPT* Perspectives for Patients is based on an article by Mulligan I et al, titled "Prevalence of Neurocognitive and Balance Deficits in Collegiate Football Players Without Clinically Diagnosed Concussion," *J Orthop Sports Phys Ther 2012;42(7):625-632. doi:10.2519/jospt.2012.3798*

This Perspectives article was written by a team of *JOSPT*'s editorial board and staff, with Deydre S. Teyhen, PT, PhD, Editor, and Jeanne Robertson, Illustrator.

NEW INSIGHTS

The researchers in this study measured 45 Division IA Collegiate football players. Preseason screening was conducted using a group of tests that measured balance and mental ability. These same measures were used after the football season was over. Although none of these athletes was diagnosed with a concussion during the season, some decreases in balance and mental ability were noted at the end of the season. Actually, 32 of the 45 players (71%) had decreased performance on at least 1 of these screening tools. These results raise a concern that athletes don't know how to recognize the symptoms of a concussion and so don't see healthcare professionals to get help at the time of their injuries.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

Always wear properly fitted protective equipment when playing sports. However, if you are concerned you may have had a concussion, get it checked out! The symptoms of a concussion can vary among athletes and be hard to recognize. You should think about the potential of having a concussion whenever you have sustained an impact to your head or neck. Watch for symptoms such as headaches, confusion, dizziness, tiredness, trouble concentrating, forgetfulness, getting easily frustrated/irritated, trouble sleeping, trouble paying attention, balance problems, vomiting, being bothered by light or noise, blurred vision, ringing in the ears, vision changes, or a loss of consciousness. Because so many athletes have trouble recognizing that they have had a brain injury, some sports teams are using these preseason screening tools to make it easier to find out if athletes have had any changes in function that might indicate a problem. These tests can also be used after a head injury to help determine whether further medical tests are needed or how much rest is required before the athlete returns to sport. Only a healthcare provider can tell if an athlete has had a concussion and when it is safe to return to play.

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