

Safety is No Accident

September will be here before you know it. The beginning of the school year marks the start of another year of organized sports. Many school children will participate in soccer, volleyball, football, basketball, swimming, track, tennis, and baseball, to name a few.

Participating in sports is fun for young people, and provides an enjoyable way to exercise and stay fit. But parents, coaches, and players should keep safety as their top priority when becoming involved with sports. Sports safety can be achieved by employing a variety of strategies.

The most obvious method to participate in sports safely involves the use of protective gear; the specific gear depends upon the sport being played. To protect the eyes, football and baseball helmets should have face masks attached. Goggles work well for hockey, soccer, basketball, racquet sports, skiing, snowboarding, and baseball, too. All eye protection should have cushions above the eyebrows and over the nose, and should fit securely.

When protecting the face, it is important to safeguard teeth and the tongue in some sports. Mouth guards are useful, and can be purchased at sporting goods stores or through a dentist.

Helmets protect the head from injury caused by objects or other players. Football, hockey, baseball, bicycling, and snowboarding are a few sports in which helmet use is a must.

Other parts of the body can be protected with the appropriate use of pads. Pads come in all shapes and sizes, and help to prevent fractures and bruises to bones and joints. There are pads for knees, wrists, elbows, shins, chests, shoulders, hips, and thighs, and they are especially important in contact sports such as football, soccer, or hockey, as well as any sport that is likely to involve falls, such as in-line skating and skateboarding.

However, all the protective gear in the world will not ensure safety unless it is used correctly. The gear must fit properly and securely, and should never be used as a weapon against other players.

Another important consideration in sports safety involves adequate warm-up time. Warm-up exercises, including stretching, lengthens muscles, increases circulation, and raises muscle temperature. This prepares the body for the physical activity that is to come. Warm-ups that last 15-30 minutes greatly reduce the likelihood of a sport injury.

Knowing the rules of the game and practicing allow the players to learn how the sport should be played. The rules exist for the safety of the athlete, and adequate practice time results in more skilled, safer players.

It is also important that young athletes get plenty of rest, eat nutritious meals, and drink lots of water. A healthy lifestyle keeps the body strong and in optimal working condition, and helps keep the mind alert so that accidental injury is more easily avoided.

One other cautionary note should be made to coaches, parents, and players: no one should play with an injury. Many athletes insist on participating even after being hurt, but this can make the injury worse. And when an injury occurs, remember the RICE principle:

REST -- when an injury occurs, stop playing and rest.

ICE -- apply ice to the injured area for 20 minutes every hour until the swelling goes down.

COMPRESSION – wrap the injured area to limit any swelling and to keep the injury still.

ELEVATE – raise the injured part above the heart to minimize swelling.

Participating in sports will never be accident-free. But by keeping safety as the top priority, young people can enjoy playing sports with minimal risk to their bodies while reaping the benefits of a healthy life-style. For further information on sports safety, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at 721-2822.