Head injuries

...and other concerns of the cranium

You may not realize it, but your brain — that precious, wonderful, fragile organ that’s the warehouse for everything you’ve ever learned, thought, felt, said or did — is protected by a skull that’s only about one centimeter thick, or roughly the width of a pencil. Considering the intelligence and creative brilliance the human brain is capable of producing, it’s surprising so many people fail to properly protect it when they go about many of their favorite activities.

Injuries of the head and brain can be devastating for victims and their families. Brain injuries can be fatal or result in permanent, long-term damage affecting an individual’s ability to function in day-to-day life. These effects can include

• memory loss
• problem solving difficulties
• changes in personality
• depression
• fatigue
• anger
• problems with concentration
• and other serious effects.

A concussion occurs in this country every four minutes according to the Canadian Health Network and the Ontario Brain Injury Association. Alarmingly, the average age of a person suffering his or her first concussion is only ten, and following their first concussion, people are four times more likely to suffer another. Even mild concussions, occurring years apart, can have a cumulative effect on a person. Children are especially at risk because their brains are still developing and growing.

Concussions typically involve a jarring blow to the head that causes the brain to move in the skull. Concussions can also be caused by a blow to the face or jaw or by the whiplash effect of the neck. People do not have to lose consciousness to have a concussion.

The right helmet for the job

There’s no end to the ways people can hurt their heads, but some of the more common sources of injuries include car accidents, organized sporting activities (soccer, hockey, football), accidents on the job or playground, falls and assaults, bicycle accidents and medical events such as strokes. While helmets won’t prevent every accident and injury, the statistics clearly support the use of properly fitting helmets to reduce the risk.
Put a lid on it

According to Safe Kids Canada, an organization that provides information and education on how to keep children safe, children are simply not wearing their helmets. In a 2002 survey, Safe Kids Canada found 55 percent of youth ages 11 to 14 don’t always wear helmets when riding a bicycle, 70 percent don’t always wear head protection when in-line skating and 84 percent don’t always wear the headgear when on skateboards and scooters. Peer pressure, worries about ‘helmet-head-hair’ and overconfidence (“I won’t fall down”) were some of the reasons stated for not using their helmets, but surprisingly, these weren’t the leading reasons. Instead, simple forgetfulness (45%) and complaints about the comfort of the headgear (45%) were the reasons most often cited. That’s good news for parents because both of these issues can be easily addressed.

Regardless of the activity — whether it’s working on a construction site, downhill skiing, playing hockey, skateboarding, mountain biking, horseback riding or others — the proper helmet for the job will provide a measure of protection to every age of participant. A helmet that fits and is worn properly will be comfortable, and today there are lots of appealing designs and colours on the market. Children might be more enthusiastic and diligent about wearing their headgear if allowed to choose their own so that it suits their personal tastes and sense of style.

Children are prone to injuries because their physical coordination is still developing and they have a lower ability to assess the risks associated with many activities. However, adults are equally at risk when they fail to exercise common sense and take the same precautions that parents preach to their children.

Start setting a good example

In Helms: Attitudes and Actions, an Ipsos-Reid telephone survey conducted to assess Canadians’ attitudes toward the wearing of helmets for activities such as cycling, skateboarding, in-line skating and using scooters, adults almost unanimously agreed that helmets can prevent injuries and should always be used when participating in these activities. However, the same survey participants admit that only 35 percent of them always wear a helmet when cycling, and 45 percent never wear a helmet. Does the behaviour of adults influence their children? Absolutely. Three-quarters of the adults who never wear a cycling helmet indicate that their children never wear one either. By comparison, 98 percent of adults who always wear a helmet say that their children also always wear one. While government law makers have made helmet use mandatory in many Canadian provinces, the importance of setting a strict helmet-always rule in the household and enforcing it among all members of the family cannot be overstated.

Brain food

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Hockey: the great Canadian collision sport

A common topic for discussion in arenas across the country is whether body contact should be allowed in children’s hockey leagues. As much as we all love the physical nature of our national pastime, some of the research on body contact and concussions is cause for concern. An essay published in the July 2003 edition of the Canadian Medical Association Journal suggests more and more children and adults who play hockey are suffering concussions, despite the better quality equipment that’s available to players, “Each season, 10% - 12% of minor league hockey players 9 - 17 years old who are injured report a head injury, most commonly a concussion.”1 The article’s authors find the connection between body contact, injury and concussion to be not unlike the link between smoking and lung cancer.

Regardless of the sport or activity, parents, coaches and leagues have a responsibility to ensure the field of play is safe for every participant. In the case of hockey, one option worth considering is the size of the field of play itself. A study that appeared in the August 2004 Canadian Journal of Neurological Sciences’ compared collisions (with players, boards/glass, ice, sticks and pucks) sustained during high level hockey games played on North American size rinks with those occurring on the larger International ice surfaces. Eleven games of professional or world calibre play were observed on each ice surface. The study counted an average of 264 collisions on the smaller rinks compared to 170 on the International size ice sheets, which are 4 feet longer and 15 feet wider than the North American surfaces. On average, 39 collisions involving players’ heads were counted on the small rinks, compared to 22 on the International or Olympic size ice. Although more research and comparisons need to be done, this evidence suggests that moving to the larger ice surface will reduce the risk to players without affecting the rules and nature of the well-loved game.

References:

Sources: Safe Kids Canada, Canadian Health Network, Health Canada, Ontario Brain Injury Association, Ipsos-Reid Canadian Express omnibus survey 2002

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