



LENS

The Silent Epidemic of Concussion in Sports

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For years, few people paid attention to the potential dangers of hard-hitting encounters that occur frequently in contact sports. One of the most common injuries—concussion—has been referred to as a “silent epidemic.” It was once assumed that there were no long-term consequences of concussion. However, this has recently changed as more individuals have come forward to discuss the effects of having played such sports as football years ago. Ted Johnson, a former New England Patriots linebacker, had multiple concussions that resulted in significant memory and emotional problems throughout his thirties. Previously, athletes just “played through the pain.” The former Denver Broncos and Washington Redskins running back Clinton Portis described his experiences as follows:

The truth is I had a lot of concussions. . . . It was just the way things were at the time. I’d get hit hard and be woozy. I’d be dizzy. I’d take a play off and then go back in. Sometimes when I went back into the game, I still couldn’t see straight. This happened all the time. Sometimes once or twice a game. (Davenport, 2013)

It is now known that a person is most susceptible to another concussion for about 10 days after the first. Research has suggested that older,

retired professional football players experience neurocognitive disorders at 5 times the national rate. It is becoming more apparent that repetitive blows to the head affect the brain in negative ways, which can lead to neurocognitive disorders. Often, it is not contact with another person but a person’s head hitting the ground that produces the concussion. This is not limited to men; women who play such sports as field hockey and soccer are also at risk. The symptoms of concussion in men and women are very similar. Even a fall from a bicycle can result in a concussion.

In response to a new recognition of the effects of concussion, a number of groups have changed their approach. The NFL now supports studies of the long-term effects of concussion in professional athletes. A number of older athletes such as the Hall of Fame professional quarterback Ken Stabler, who played for the Oakland Raiders, developed chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, a degenerative brain disease believed to be caused by repeated blows to the head (Montenigro, Corp, Stein, Cantu, & Stern, 2015).

Many universities have established centers for the study of concussion, and all but three U.S. states have established laws related to concussion assessment and management in high school athletics as well as return-to-play guidelines. High school athletes are particularly at risk, since surveys suggest that this group believes there is not a problem playing sports with a concussion. Returning to play before the concussion has been fully resolved can increase long-term injuries.

Since adolescence is a time in which an individual’s brain goes through a series of cortical reorganizations, brain insults at this time put the adolescent at greater risk for serious injury. Further, as risk takers, adolescent athletes may even deny there is a problem so they can continue to play. For college and professional athletes, different pressures may cause them to ignore information concerning the effects of concussion. Overall, this can lead to a lack of candor when athletes at all levels describe their symptoms.

The CDC now offers a number of programs directed at athletics at all levels for the care and prevention of concussion and also works with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (<http://www.cdc.gov/headsup/index.html>). Professional football now has individuals in the press box who

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