

USE YOUR HEAD... SAFELY

by Nancy Rebel, SIRC

Soccer is one of the most popular team sports in the world. We all love the excitement of a diving header into the net off a cross ball from the corner or when two players go up to challenge for a head ball in the air. But at the same time we worry about possible collision and serious head injuries when the unthinkable happens. How worried should we be and how can we protect our players from possible short and long-term damages from head injury?



Much research has been put into studying the impact of heading on the brain and long-term neurological damage. To this point, there is no definitive evidence that links neurological damage to normal football heading. In fact, most soccer head injuries and concussions occur not from heading, but from head to player (head, elbow, knee, foot) or ground contact during the game. For players who do incur a head injury during a game or practice, proper medical attention should be pursued. In the case of concussion, the player should not be allowed to return to the current game or training session, should

be monitored closely for change in status and medical evaluation should be sought out.

Over recent years, the move away from old, heavy, water-absorbing, leather soccer balls to the new light, water-resistant, synthetic balls has reduced the force of impact of heading the ball. This combined with smaller diameter balls for younger athletes has contributed to a safer heading environment for soccer. Headgear has also been developed in order to make heading safer. However, research indicates that headgear does not provide signifi-

TIPS FOR SAFE HEADING:

- Eyes open
- Mouth closed
- Arms out to sides for balance
- Make ball contact at the hairline (flat surface of the forehead)
- Step into the ball contact
- Keep the neck firm and upper body rigid
- Arch the back and propel the head and shoulders forward
- Be aware of the players/objects around you

cant protection during ball contact but it does provide protection from head to head contact.

What remains at the core for heading safety is proper technique and awareness of your environment.

Resources:

- Dvorak, J., Junge, A., and McCrory, P. *Head injuries*. British Journal of Sports Medicine 39(Suppl 1) Aug 2005, p.i1-i2.
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- Withnall, C., Shewchenko, N., Wonnacott, M., and Dvorak, J. *Effectiveness of headgear in football*. British Journal of Sports Medicine 39(Suppl 1) Aug 2005, p.i40-i48.



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