

Australian Medical Association Limited
ABN 37 008 426 793

42 Macquarie Street, Barton ACT 2600: PO Box 6090, Kingston ACT 2604
 Telephone: (02) 6270 5400 Facsimile (02) 6270 5499
 Website : <http://www.ama.com.au/>



IF IN DOUBT, SIT THEM OUT – NEW RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPORTS-RELATED CONCUSSION

Parents, coaches, and sports administrators should err on the side of caution and not allow any child or teenager with potential concussion to return to the sporting field for at least two weeks after their symptoms have cleared, a joint Position Statement from the Australian Medical Association (AMA) and the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) recommends.

The AMA and the AIS today released the results of their long-running project to produce resources and a website to help to identify key symptoms of sports-related concussion and how to respond.

Outgoing AMA President, Professor Brian Owler, and AIS Chief Medical Officer, Dr David Hughes, launched the Position Statement on *Concussion in Sport* and the Australian Government-funded concussioninsport.gov.au website at the 2016 AMA National Conference in Canberra.

“Both the AMA and the AIS want to help make sport and physical activity safer for everyone,” Professor Owler, a neurosurgeon, said.

“Playing sport is good for both physical and mental health, and all Australians should consider becoming more physically active.

“However, it is also important to remember that concussion can affect athletes at all levels of sport, from school children to full-time professionals.

“Sports-related concussion is a type of brain injury that is not always obvious, and symptoms may change over time.

“That is why it is essential that athletes and those playing sport are diagnosed and managed immediately, with appropriate care and ongoing monitoring.

“The message is this – if in doubt, sit them out. Missing a couple of weeks of playing won’t kill them, but letting someone with a brain injury back on to the field – even just the training field - can be disastrous.

“Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable. Playing sport is a healthy and normal part of childhood but it can lead to injuries to developing brains.

“In most instances, with correct medical diagnosis and treatment, concussion symptoms resolve within seven to 10 days. In the case of children and adolescents, they should follow a return to play protocol and not return to contact training or play for at least 14 days after their symptoms have cleared.”

The concussioninsport.gov.au website provides athletes, coaches, parents and medical practitioners with timely, simple, evidence-based information on how to identify and manage concussion in sport.

The release of the website and Position Statement came on the last full day of Professor Owler's two-year term as AMA President.

"It is pleasing to be able to finally release the results of this long-term joint project with the AIS, and to be able to give parents and coaches the guidance they need when dealing with suspected concussion," Professor Owler said.

BACKGROUND

Sporting codes around Australia and the world are grappling with how to deal with concussion and brain injuries.

In Australia, some professional football codes have introduced on-field independent concussion doctors.

The National Rugby League has implemented rules stipulating that players must not return to the field if they exhibit any of the following signs:

- Loss of consciousness,
- Falling to the ground without taking protective action,
- Seizure,
- Memory impairment, or
- Balance disturbance (ataxia).

The Australian Football League also has concussion rules, stipulating that any player who has suffered a concussion or is suspected of having a concussion must be medically assessed as soon as possible after the injury and must not be allowed to return to play in the same game or train in the same practice session.

For AFL players aged 5-17, players with suspected concussion must be withdrawn from playing or training until fully evaluated by a medical practitioner and cleared to play.

In the United States, all four major sport associations have strict concussion protocols and all 50 States have now passed some form of youth sports concussion law. As many as 50 class-action lawsuits are reportedly expected to be filed in the coming months by former college football players seeking damages for lingering brain injuries and ailments.

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CONTACT: John Flannery 02 6270 5477 / 0419 494 761
 Kirsty Waterford 02 6270 5464 / 0427 209 753

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