

The Medical Minute: March is brain injury awareness month

March 24 2011, By Susan Rzucidlo

March is National Brain Injury Awareness Month. Traumatic brain injuries are disruptions or changes in the way the brain functions that occur due to a blow or jolt to the head or penetrating injuries. The severity can range from mild to severe. Brain injuries are the most common cause of death and lifelong disability for children. According to data from the Level 1 Pediatric Trauma Center at Penn State Hershey Children's Hospital, the brain injuries that top the list are from sports, bike crashes, falls, or motor vehicle crashes.

The most common brain injuries are concussions. Even though they are the least severe of the brain injuries, they must be managed in a prompt and coordinated way. Most children and adults with a concussion recover quickly and fully, while some will have symptoms that last for days, or even weeks. The effects of a more serious concussion can last for months or longer. A repeat concussion that occurs before the brain recovers from the first (usually within a short period) can be very dangerous and can slow recovery or increase the chances for long-term problems. A repeat concussion can even be fatal.

Most concussions occur without a loss of consciousness. It is important that with older children -- especially those involved in sports -- parents, coaches and school nurses know the causes for concussions and symptoms. Some common symptoms are amnesia or loss of memory of events before or after the injury occurred, headache, fatigue, nausea and vomiting, sensitivity to light or noises, difficulty concentrating and sleep changes. It is important to seek medical care with a concussion

management expert. The Penn State Hershey Concussion Program is comprised of a team of physicians and other providers who can evaluate and manage the injured child and teen after a concussion.

The concussion program provides expert care for the brain injuries and is equally committed to spreading the word that injuries can be prevented. Ways to prevent head injuries change with the age of the child and depending on what they are doing that may cause the injury. The injury reduction activities at Penn State Hershey Children's Hospital Pediatric Trauma and Injury Prevention Program address these major injury risk areas, considering the risks as children progress through developmental stages. The program components include education for children, families and health care providers; distribution of safety devices and evaluation; and research of strategies to reduce injuries.

And a minute on helmets ...

For all ages from toddlers to adults, a properly fitted helmet can reduce the risk of brain injuries by 88 percent; however, only one out of five cyclists ages 5 to 14 usually wears a helmet. Also, often the incorrect helmet is used for other sports, such as wearing a bike helmet for skiing or baseball. A helmet should be labeled to indicate that it is certified by a reputable standards and testing organization - ANSI, Snell or ASTM International.

Reminder to children, parents and caregivers:

-- Make sure the helmet fits and you know how to put it on correctly. In a crash, the risk of head injury is doubled if the helmet is worn incorrectly. A helmet should sit on top of the head in a level position, and should not rock forward and backward or side to side. The helmet straps must always be buckled but not too tightly.

-- Remember bike helmets are for riding bikes and other human-powered wheels. Kids should not wear bike [helmets](#) on the playground (where the straps can get caught on equipment and cause injury) or for activities that require specialized helmets (such as skiing or football). Bike helmets are appropriate for roller skating, inline skating and skateboarding without aerial stunts, and for use with nonmotorized scooters. The American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons recommends that children under 12 wear a bike helmet while sledding.

-- When in doubt, get help. The helmets are sized according to head size. If you are unsure about how to select or fit a helmet, seek assistance at a sporting goods store or bike shop or go to bike helmet safety institute at www.bhsi.org/fit.htm .

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