

Sticking your neck out for the PWHL: A call to mandate neck guards in women's hockey

April 24 2024, by Claire Biafore



Credit: Tima Miroshnichenko from Pexels

The [Professional Women's Hockey League](#) (PWHL) has gained immense popularity since its inception in 2023. It has boasted a number of sold out games and has set audience attendance records in [Toronto](#), [Ottawa](#), [Montréal](#), [Detroit](#) and [Minnesota](#).

Despite this, the league is still lacking in [safety measures](#). Currently, the [PWHL doesn't mandate the usage of neck laceration protectors](#) (also known as neck guards), although they do strongly recommend them.

Since the death of ice hockey player Adam Johnson in October 2023 from a neck injury, there has been much debate about whether neck guards should be obligatory in professional hockey.

In the wake of Johnson's death, [the executive director of the PWHL players' association predicted](#) neck guards would become mandatory, but this has yet to happen. There is currently [no policy in place](#) for the implementation of neck guards within the league.

As the former Manager of Player Health and Safety of the Canadian Women's Hockey League and the Professional Women's Hockey Players Association, I have first-hand experience with the necessary and required equipment and safety policies.

While our [medical board](#) always recommended that neck protectors be implemented, it was never formalized due to organizational discrepancies.

With the [newly announced body contact rule](#) and the low salaries of PWHL players, there should be a mandate to introduce neck guards to protect players' health and well-being.

New rules in professional women's hockey

Players within the PWHL make an average salary of [\\$35,000 per season](#), which is far from enough to support themselves in the long-term if they are injured during play. With the new induction of contact within the league, this leaves the players open to the possibility of injuries.

The PWHL rule book states body contact is permitted "when there is a clear intention of playing the puck or attempting to 'gain possession' of the puck."

However, hitting or body contact, [is presently not allowed in women's hockey at grassroots and minor levels](#). This means players are not taught how to hit or take a hit before they reach the professional level, leaving the league with possible liability issues. Without proper measures in place to mitigate injury risks, the PWHL could face legal challenges and damage to its reputation.

Neck injuries, while rare in hockey, can be severe and potentially life threatening. One study found that of the nearly 12,000 athletes interviewed, only [485 \(1.8%\) reported being cut in the neck area by a skate blade](#) during play.

While neck protection is not foolproof, it is still a proven way to minimize injury in hockey. [Systematic reviews have found that players who wear full facial protection](#), including neck guards, have a reduction in the number and risk of overall head and neck injuries.

The studies also found that players who sustained a concussion were able to return to sport sooner than those who didn't wear facial protection.

Neck guard policies in hockey

While there are equipment policies for the usage of neck guards within Hockey Canada, the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) and U.S. Hockey, there are none in the PWHL.

Hockey Canada states that the usage of neck guards is [only required for "players registered in minor and female hockey."](#)

The Western Hockey League [joined the Ontario Hockey League and Quebec Maritimes Junior Hockey League in November 2023](#) in mandating the use of neck guards following Johnson's death.

The IIHF previously only recommended that all players wear neck guards, [but mandated the use of a neck laceration protectors at all levels](#) of competition in December 2023.

U.S. Hockey, which oversees the sport in the U.S., similarly recommends that players wear neck protectors, but does not require it for all ages. As of January 2024, the organization has [approved legislation to mandate neck guards for all players other than adults.](#)

But the PWHL, like the NHL, does not adhere to any rule for the mandatory usage of neck guards, leaving the decision up to each player.

Women's hockey and safety

Women's hockey has set exemplary standards for other types of equipment safety, including the use of helmets [according to safety standards](#). This success can be partly attributed to equipment requirements at the grassroots and development level, which have carried over to the professional level.

In contrast, male hockey players [often compromise helmet safety](#) by removing padding or loosening chin straps, believing their helmets are

weighing them down and slowing down play.

But while women's [hockey](#) has made strides in safety and injury prevention, there is still room for improvement. By mandating neck guards, the PWHL will continue to promote players' health and safety at a high caliber. It is the best interest of the PWHL to mandate neck guards to match the implementation of body contact within play.

As the sport continues to evolve and gain recognition, ensuring the safety and well-being of its athletes remains paramount. By implementing these measures, the PWHL will not only uphold its responsibility to its players, but also set a standard for progress when it comes to safety in professional sport.

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