

Heads Up, Don't Duck!

By: Ken Spresser, D.C.

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Ice hockey is the fastest contact sport in the world and the ultimate team sport. Although the object of ice hockey is different than other contact sports, like boxing and football, contact does occur between players, the puck, sticks, goal posts, boards, and of course the ice. Injuries can and will occur, however, injuries do not have to be part of ice hockey.

Neck injuries occur when a player's head makes contact with any of the objects mentioned above or with another player with the neck bent forward (flexed downward with the chin near the chest). This flexing allows the neck vertebrae to line up in a straight line allowing a compressive force hitting the top of the head to be transmitted to the vertebrae. This may result in a cervical spine fracture or dislocation, which injures the spinal cord. If a cervical vertebrae fracture occurs it compresses the spinal cord resulting in paralysis below the level of the fracture and possibly death. A player does not have to be going at full speed for this injury to occur. It is much less common for this injury to occur when the neck is hyper extended (head bent backward).

The incidence of spinal cord injuries in ice hockey is rare. USA hockey has been keeping track of these injuries since 1995. On average there have been about two spinal cord injuries per year since 1988. Half the injuries have occurred in teenagers over 16 and the other half was in the 30-40 age group. By comparison, American football has had an average of 8-11 spinal cord injuries per year since 1977.

What can we do to help prevent spinal cord injuries from occurring? Players should cushion their collisions with boards, goal posts and other players by using any other part of their body besides their head. If head contact is unavoidable, players should keep their heads up so that the collision is taken on the forehead or facemasks. Keep your head up, your hands up, and don't duck.

Checking from behind has been implicated in a third of the injuries found in a Canadian study. Coaches should emphasize to their players the danger of severe injury when a player checks another player from behind. One of the biggest mistakes that teenage and adult hockey players make is wearing a loose chinstrap like the pros. It may look cool but it is really stupid! What do you think happens if you are checked from behind? Your head goes backward exposing your forehead with the helmet possibly coming off your head. Coaches should also emphasize neck strengthening and flexibility exercises. These exercises are available from my office simply with a phone call.

Body checking is part of ice hockey but it is not the only part. Skating, shooting, passing, and puck handling are also germane to the game. The purpose of body checking is to separate the player from the puck, not to separate the player from consciousness.

What might happen in the future to help decrease spinal cord injuries? Checking from behind currently results in a two minute minor plus a ten minute major penalty. No checking from

behind! There is also an opinion that having more distance behind the goal net such as twelve to fifteen feet would offer less opportunity for players to make catastrophic contact with the boards.

What about protective equipment? This is no equipment that can prevent cervical spine injuries. Neck protectors will not prevent spinal injuries.

Players, parents, coaches, referees and league administrators must be aware that cervical spine injuries that result in paralysis can occur from collision with players, boards, the ice or the goal post. Everyone involved in ice hockey should view the video tape "Checking From Behind" provided by USA Hockey.

Dr. Spresser has consulted with Dr. Alan Ashare, M.D. who is the chairman of the Massachusetts Hockey Safety Committee and has conducted national seminars for injuries for USA Hockey. Dr. Spresser is a chiropractor and an emergency medical technician with 38 years of experience, currently as a player and in the past as a coach, referee and team doctor. You can address questions either to "Hockey Talk" or directly to Dr. Spresser at 7878 Wadsworth Blvd, Ste 301, Arvada, CO 80003. And you can call his office at (303) 425-9057 to receive a copy of neck strengthening and flexibility exercises.