Tackling Back Problems in Young Football Players

Dr. Praveen Kadimcherla with Atlantic Spine Center offers tips on avoiding and treating football-related back injuries

West Orange, NJ (PRWEB) October 22, 2015 -- October 2015 – Tackling may be one of football’s key skills, but it’s even more important to tackle the most common back and neck injuries among young players that arise from this all-American pastime by preventing and treating them appropriately, according to Praveen Kadimcherla, MD, an orthopedic spine surgeon at Atlantic Spine Center.

Now that kids across the country are back to school, thousands of young athletes are starting another football season – a sport that can leave them vulnerable to spine injuries whose effects may last for years or decades, explains Dr. Kadimcherla, who completed two spinal surgery fellowships and is a published author on spine disorders and treatment.

Back injuries among young athletes occur in 10% to 15% of participants, and that rate may be as high as 50% among football linemen, according to a 2011 study in the journal Sports Health.

“Since football is a collision sport, it may pose a higher risk of neck and back injuries among players,” Dr. Kadimcherla notes. “So it’s especially important to understand what aspects of the game raise those risks and what young athletes – and their parents – should know to ensure they condition properly for the rigors of the sport and avoid spine injury.”

Most common football-related back injuries
What are some of the back and neck injuries resulting from football? Sprained ligaments and strained muscles top the list, often caused by “repetitive overuse” – practicing or playing too hard for too long – along with lack of proper conditioning, insufficient stretching or trauma.

But playing specific positions (such as defensive back, linebacker or offensive line) or performing certain maneuvers (including blocking and tackling) create the highest risk of suffering a more serious spine injury known as a “stinger,” Dr. Kadimcherla says. Stingers occur when the head is forced backward and toward the side, compressing one of the nerves in the spinal cord in the neck, or when the nerves in the neck and shoulder are overstretched as the head is forced sideways.

The result is a sudden and severe painful stinging sensation in one of the arms that can last from seconds to minutes. Stingers don’t result in paralysis, but tend to recur over time. “If not properly diagnosed and treated, stingers can lead to persistent pain or even arm weakness,” Dr. Kadimcherla says.

Another potential spine injury to young football players is spondylolysis, a degenerative disease resulting when cartilage in the vertebral discs of the neck and spine lose fluid and mobility, in turn causing pain and stiffness. Dr. Kadimcherla offers that proper diagnosis and conservative, non surgical treatment, is a first course of action for players with spondylolysis.

Tips for Preventing and treating spinal injuries from football
It goes without saying that preventing football-related spine injury is far superior to any treatment in sustaining a healthy back. Dr. Kadimcherla points out that prevention often starts with using the correct techniques for
football moves such as squatting, tackling, blocking and take-downs. Proper muscle strengthening, conditioning and stretching before and after play is also vital, he says.

“I always tell patients to ask their coaches for help in executing proper football techniques,” Dr. Kadimcherla says. “Most football-related back injuries can be avoided by educating players about how their spines work and which positions to avoid during play. If players avoid direct helmet hits and keep their heads up while tackling, instead of dropping their head before impact, they’re much less likely to suffer a neck injury.”

Once a back or neck injury has been sustained, however, proper diagnosis is key to effective treatment. Since most football-related back injuries are minor, typical treatments include:

- NSAIDs (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs), which ease pain and swelling
- Ice and heat therapy – heat being more useful for muscle spasms
- Muscle relaxants
- Physical therapy, including special exercises to speed recovery from the athlete’s specific injury and strengthen weak muscles in the back, neck and arms
- Cortisone injection around the injured nerve root
- Taking a break from playing football for a period of time, depending on a doctor’s or trainer’s recommendation

Before returning to the gridiron, sport-specific exercises that mimic the movements the football player normally executes should be part of his recovery. “It’s also crucial to evaluate and correct poor technique and mechanics that may have led to the athlete suffering the initial injury,” Dr. Kadimcherla says. “Don’t get back on the field until you’ve addressed all the reasons you hurt your back in the first place.”

Atlantic Spine Center is a nationally recognized leader for endoscopic spine surgery with several locations in NJ and NYC. www.atlanticspinecenter.com, www.atlanticspinecenter.nyc

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