

Doctors at Brain Injury Summit Applaud NFL Helmet-to-Helmet Rule

On behalf of Johnston, Moore & Thompson

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Last week, in response to increasing concerns about concussions among players, the NFL announced that it will now issue fines and suspensions for players who engage in vicious tackling and helmet-to-helmet hits. Recent medical research has suggested that repeated concussions could cause mild [traumatic brain injury](#), which could have long-term adverse effects.

The Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine Center recently hosted a brain injury summit, and doctors and scientists across the conference expressed their approval of the NFL's new rules.

"Players will now think twice about lunging at another player or tackling with their head down or going at another player with their head down so as not to risk a helmet to helmet hit," said David Dodick, a neurology professor at the Mayo's Arizona facility, who directs Mayo's headache and concussion program.

Nevertheless, doctors and researchers think the change in policy needs to go farther. We need a cultural change in both amateur and professional sports that gives players with "invisible" sports injuries like concussions the confidence to call it quits when they've taken a hard hit.

With Brain Injuries, Lack of Symptoms Doesn't Mean Healing Is Complete, Doctors Say

According to Dodick, most athletes with concussions probably recover completely over time. The danger to the brain comes from returning to play too quickly, which can make them vulnerable to repeat [brain injury](#) and more serious symptoms.

"We're coming to realize that even when an athlete, for example, comes back to normal and may not have any symptoms, that the brain may not be completely recovered," he said.

In addition to the pressure -- internal and external -- that many players feel to return to play too soon, a lot of players and coaches don't appreciate the potential seriousness of a concussion. A mild brain injury is especially dangerous precisely because they're invisible.

"If somebody comes out and they can't walk because they tore a ligament in their knee, obviously they can't go back in and play," said Dr. Jonathan Finnoff, professor in physical medicine and rehabilitation at the Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine Center.

"But if somebody comes out and they have a headache, then a lot of people can't understand why that person can't play."

That macho attitude is dangerous, Says Finnoff.

"We should never be saying, 'Boy, he came back from that concussion and played in the second half and he's tough.' I mean, absolutely, nobody that has a concussion should be going back in and playing the same game."

In the past, NFL players have been fined or ejected for illegal hits. A series of hard tackles prompted the NFL to increase its fines and add the possibility of suspension for those who break the rules.

Source: Minnesota Public Radio, "[Mayo researchers applaud tougher concussion rules](#)," Elizabeth Baier, October 20, 2010