

Girls, Young Women at Higher Risk of Concussion Injuries

By Gillian Barna, Government Relations Intern

We learned this week that concussions among girls and young women are something to take very seriously. Much of the talk in recent years has been focused on concussions among professional football players: there can be serious lifelong ailments and early death among players who sustain concussions. But now we hear that girls and young women as student athletes are at more significant risk of injury due to athletics-related concussions than boys and young men.

The problem was explored in depth at a briefing on National Girls and Women in Sports Day, Feb. 4, organized by Girls, Inc., National Women's Law Center, Women's Sports Foundation and SHAPE America with the Congressional Brain Injury Task Force.



An impressive array of champion athletes spoke at the event. The line-up included Sarah Hughes, Olympic Gold Medalist and two-time U.S. World Championship medalist in Figure Skating, as well as Teresa Edwards, five-time Olympic Gold Medalist and member of the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame. Donna de Verona, two-time Olympic gold medalist swimmer and first president of the Women's Sports Foundation, was in the audience along with Lillian Greene-Chamberlain, three-time U.S. national champion and American record-holder in Track & Field. These accomplished women spoke of their love for sports, the important role athletic participation can play in a young girl's life, and the serious repercussions of suffering a concussion and not receiving proper care.

Concussions Have Consequences – The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that U.S. emergency departments treat an estimated 173,285 sports-related mTBIs (mild Traumatic Brain Injuries) among those 19 and under. Many of these young athletes attend schools that do not possess the proper resources to sufficiently diagnose and treat their injuries. As a consequence, 41 percent of student athletes return to play before their injury has healed. A concussion an athlete experiences before fully recovering from a previous concussion is referred to as a repeat concussion, which can

delay recovery, increase the likelihood of future concussions and cause long-term health problems.

Unfortunately, female athletes suffer concussions at higher rates than male athletes. Speaking to this higher incidence of concussions, Dr. Robert Stevens, an Associate Professor at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, attributed the increased risk for females to thinner necks, smaller head sizes, and fewer neck muscles. He warned that the symptoms of a concussion prove more severe and prolonged for females, including dizziness, headaches, confusion, and decreased levels of concentration.

Much to the surprise of the audience attending the briefing, the highest incidences of concussions occur with women's soccer and basketball, even more so than men's football. Acknowledging the high risk female athletes endure, Dr. Stevens urged for better guidelines and practices to ensure the safety of our young girls involved with sports. Luckily, Members of Congress are on it!

Legislation Requires Guidelines to be Issued – Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr. (D-N.J.) and his fellow co-chair on the Congressional Brain Injury Task Force, Rep. Tom Rooney (R-Fla.), spoke about legislation they introduced last Congress, the [ConTACT Act of 2013 \(H.R. 3113\)](#), that would require the Pediatric Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Guideline Expert Panel to issue guidelines for school-aged student athletes returning to play after a concussion. It would also require the Secretary of Health and Human Services to establish grant guidelines for states to implement best practices in concussion diagnosis, treatment and management.

Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) introduced a [similar bill, S. 1516](#), on the Senate side in the 113th Congress. The legislation especially aims to prevent repeat concussions in school-aged children, which would involve implementing post-injury neuropsychological testing for athletes and ensuring schools are adequately staffed with trained medical professionals able to carry out the guidelines. Presumably, these bills will be re-introduced in the current (114th) Congress and you should let members of your Congressional delegation know that you support this legislation.

Solutions to the issues that plague our young female athletes are within our reach. If you have a child in school playing sports, do what you can to spread the word about [concussions](#) and the need for adequate diagnosis and treatment. Ask what your child's school's policies are with regard to concussion. We need to make sure our student athletes' health is protected while they enjoy the many advantages of participating in athletic programs.