

Heading Up Health Study on High School Heads

OSF HealthCare initiates concussion monitoring program for Rockford student athletes

It's become a growing concern for athletes and a worry for those who love them, particularly Mom and Dad. Are contact sports doing damage to the brains of participants?

Now, through a study, led by OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony College of Nursing, student athletes at four Rockford high schools, their coaches, trainers and families will be able to get a more accurate assessment of any concussion concerns.

Thanks to a grant from the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois, a computer program called ImPACT (*Immediate Post Concussion Assessment and Cognitive Test*) is available to monitor the head health of athletes.

"It give us objective data so that we know where everybody starts at," says Dr. Brandie Messer, Doctorate of Nurse Practice (DNP) at OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony College of Nursing and study coordinator. "So that if they were to have a head injury, then when we re-test we can tell, with their scores being lower, when they get back to their baseline they'll be safe and their brain is healed enough to be able to return to play."

While available to all student athletes, the four year study is specifically concentrating on freshmen boys in football and freshmen girls in soccer.

The non-invasive exam is set up like a video game. ImPACT is described as a physical test for the brain that measures memory, reaction time, speed and attention.

"You catch a lot of thing that you normally wouldn't if you didn't use it because it's really a cognitive test," says Chad Spaulding, and OSF Athletic Trainer at Rockford East High School. "So, you got the numbers right there and you have a baseline originally, which we're doing right now - testing all the - get a baseline on everybody. And then we can compare the results after they re-take it, you know, several days after the injury. You know, there's a couple of different steps. A couple days and then a week, depending on symptoms. So that you can really compare those numbers and really know where you're at."

Jokingly, when first told of the ImPACT, Rockford East High School athletic director and head football coach, Gary Griffin thought, "it's going to take way my practice time". Seriously however, he sees this as another tool in efforts already in place to make football safer.

"With all of the new helmets, all the new safety equipment - the way that we practice now - all those things, I think football is, by far, smarter and more safer than it's ever been," says Gary Griffin, Athletic Director and Head Football Coach at Rockford East High School.

As for the student athletes, aside from keeping their attention through the 20 to 25 minute test, they're finding it helpful and are lining up to participate.

That's due in large part to Rockford Public School District 205, athletic supervisors and, of course Mom and Dad.

During meetings to announce the initiative and study, Dr. Messer says they only question from parents was, "Where to I sign up?"