

“When in doubt, sit it out.” That’s the message coming from health professionals as fall sports practices get underway.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says one in five high school athletes will suffer a concussion during their playing season. Thirty-three percent of concussions happen during practice.

The Illinois High School Association has [strengthened rules regarding the safety of athletes suspected of having a concussion](#), but it has not changed the primary responsibility for ensuring a proper medical evaluation. That, ultimately is up to parents.

A concussion is a traumatic brain injury that interferes with normal brain function. An athlete does not have to lose consciousness to have suffered a concussion. Physical Therapist Frances Young, who manages Rehabilitation and Sleep Services at OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony’s Health Center in Alton, says the symptoms of a concussion can be mild to severe.

“Having a headache could be a sign of a concussion and the symptoms could come on immediately, a couple of days later or even months or years later,” she said.

Coaches and volunteers working with dozens of sports and marching bands in Illinois are now required to undergo training about concussion symptoms and treatment, but Young says it is important for parents to also know what to look for because the impact can be delayed.

There are a variety of physical and cognitive symptoms, and even behavior problems such as increased irritability can occur.

“Other symptoms include being dizzy or light-headed, nauseated, loss of balance, inability to tolerate bright lights, difficulty concentrating and also processing with higher-level things such as math or high level reading or concentrating on those type things.”

If a student’s symptoms don’t show up until they’re home after a game, parents should get them urgent care right away because Young says direct and immediate care is important.

In Alton, student athletes or anyone who has been diagnosed with a concussion can be referred to OSF Saint Anthony’s Health Center’s Concussion Clinic, which offers a unique, team approach that evaluates physical and cognitive deficits and coordinates rehabilitation.

“We’re very comprehensive. We include the vestibular components of the treatment as well as balance and the physical aspects to getting motion and strength back. It’s really critical. We’ve had a few patients that had treatment at other facilities in Saint Louis continue to have their symptoms. They came back here and we were able to relieve some of their symptoms through our program. Our therapists communicate well with each other so they are coordinating the treatment plan so that everybody knows what’s going on as well as giving the patient what they need.”

Imaging technology such as an MRI or a CAT scans can't detect if someone is suffering from a concussion. Symptoms that occur after a fall or bad hit are the best indicators.

Young points out the pressure can be immense for athletes, especially those in critical playing positions, to get back to the field and to the classroom so she suggests parents strongly advocate for enough time for rest, rehab, and an easing back into high-level activity.

Student athletes who suffer concussions don't have to wear a brace or cast and that can often lead friends and teachers to think they're ok. At times, they question the extent of injury because of the lack of overtly visible signs.

Because of those kinds of reactions, students are tempted to push through the challenges and Young says that can induce a setback to their healing.

"We have to sometimes encourage them to really slow down and oftentimes they don't realize what we are saying and they've done something and they come back and say, 'whoa my symptoms are worse. I'm still dizzy, my headaches are worse,' and then they kind of realize. Usually the parents are good and supportive and understanding. It's the students that have a hard time slowing down."

Healing is helped by decreasing stimuli that irritates the brain such as bright lights, loud noises, and mental stimulation such as reading, particularly off of a computer. That's why the student athlete will need to take some time off from school.

Depending on the severity of the concussion, Young says there are many levels of treatment.

"We work with trying to get the muscles more flexible and stronger in those areas to relieve pain. The Occupational Therapy aspect works on high-level balance activities. There are exercises to do with the eyes so the vestibular system can be helped with all that and minimize the dizziness."

Children and teens who continue to play while having concussion symptoms or who return to play too soon—while the brain is still healing— have a greater chance of getting another concussion. A repeat concussion that occurs while the brain is still healing from the first injury can be very serious and can affect a child or teen for a lifetime. It can even be fatal.

For more information about OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony's Concussion Clinic, call (618) 463-5171.