

Sports Eye Injuries – Maneuvering Out Of The Country’s Blind Spot

Every thirteen minutes an emergency room in the United States treats a sports eye injury that could have been prevented¹.

Americans suffer approximately 600,000 eye injuries related to sports and recreation each year. 42,000 of these injuries require emergency room treatment and an estimated 13,500 result in a permanent loss of vision.

The frequency, severity and preventability of recreational eye injuries has prompted the American Academy of Pediatrics and other prominent medical institutions to issue policy statements that strongly recommend the use of protective eyewear for risk-prone sports. The US Department of Health and Human Services has made “increasing the use of protective eyewear” in recreation and hazardous situations an objective of its *Healthy People 2010* initiative. But despite this consensus in the medical community, the majority of athletic programs, schools, parents and players remain unaware that a problem even exists. And every thirteen minutes an emergency room treats another preventable sports eye injury.

Given the position of the medical community, it is likely that protective eyewear will be legally mandated for risk-prone sports in the future. But legislation can be a long and bureaucratic process. For example, the first bicycle helmet standard was introduced in 1970, but states did not begin to mandate usage until the middle of the 1990’s. In the twenty-five years between introduction and mandating, riders suffered approximately five million bicycle-related head injuries – an estimated 85% of which could have been prevented through the use of helmets². And every thirteen minutes an emergency room treats another preventable sports eye injury.

Dr. Paul Berman, former Chairman of the AAO Sports Vision Section, eye doctor to

professional sports teams and a leading authority on the risk and prevention of recreational eye injuries, believes that it’s possible to begin saving eyes today. “With a simple mix of education and communication, channeled through the right people, it is possible to give parents and young athletes a real choice to protect their eyes when participating in sports,” said Dr. Berman.

Based on eye injury research to date³:

- The majority of sports eye injuries occur in children aged 5 to 14 (34%) and young adults aged 15-24 (29%).
- Basketball, baseball, football, soccer, hockey, volleyball and other team sports are responsible for approximately 55% percent of all sports eye injuries.

In June of 2005, Dr. Berman created the **Coalition To Prevent Sports Eye Injuries** (www.sportseyeinjuries.com) launching a two-pronged strategy aimed at:

- Mobilizing members of the eyecare community into a consistent and identifiable Sports Eye Injury Prevention resource network
- Collaborating with national sports and health organizations to engineer grass roots educational and awareness programs that communicate the risk of recreational eye injuries and the availability of the Coalition’s practice network.

“Grass-roots initiatives like the Coalition are an essential next-step to the institutional policy statements and federal objectives announced within the past couple of years. Our job is to build on the position of the medical community with a practical approach that can really impact

the number of sports eye injuries that happen every year,” said Dr. Berman. “The initial response from both the eyecare and sporting communities have been very positive, and if everyone steps up to their responsibilities I know that we can save a lot of eyes.”

But the Coalition doesn’t expect the work to be easy, which is why it’s starting with “bite-sized” objectives. “Our first objective is to get streetwear off of the courts and playing fields. Today’s fashion eyewear is made of very light frame and lens material, which creates a high risk of shattering on impact – with the potential to turn superficial ‘black eye’ injuries into penetrating ‘blind eye’ injuries. Only ASTM certified protective eyewear should be allowed on the court and field. While simple and intuitive, this is a crucial message for younger athletes and volunteer coaches. We think this launch objective is a great way to introduce the Coalition and at the same time take a swipe at a

major cause of penetrating eye injuries.” The Coalition is also working to address the need for protection among high-risk sports participants that do not wear vision corrective eyewear.

While the Coalition fully supports efforts to enact legislation as a means to prevent sports eye injuries, Dr. Berman comments, “Eye care professionals and community sports leaders shouldn’t wait for politicians to save the eyes of our kids. Protecting eyes is the responsibility of eyecare professionals – just like protecting kids is the responsibility of coaches and officials. These injuries are preventable – and if both groups do their jobs, they won’t happen. I think the laws will come, but by the time they get here I hope we no longer need them.”

And maybe sometime in the future, people will look back and wonder at the fact that every thirteen minutes emergency rooms used to treat eye injuries that could have been prevented.

¹ *Policy Statement - Protective Eyewear For Young Athletes*, AAP Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness, Pediatrics 2004; 113; 619-622, DOI10.52/peds.113.3.619

² Think First, National Injury Prevention Foundation, Bicycle Safety

³ Based On A 1998 Sports and Recreational Eye Injury Study by Prevent Blindness America involving the study of 39,297 emergency room visits