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Think “Protective Eyewear” When Playing Sports

by M. Bowes Hamill, Eye M.D.

Americans love their sports and other indoor and outdoor activities. These pastimes provide wonderful opportunities for healthy exercise and great memories for many. But for some, especially children, those memories can be ruined by preventable eye injuries:

- Approximately 42,000 sports-related eye injuries occur every year in the United States.
- More than one-third of the victims are children.
- Sports are the number one cause of eye injuries in children under the age of sixteen.
- Injuries range from corneal abrasions and eyelid bruises to internal eye injuries, such as retinal detachments and internal bleeding.
- Many of these injuries lead to vision loss and permanent blindness.
- Many of these injuries could have been prevented by the use of proper eye protection.

Sports with the highest risk for eye injury – and for which eye protection is available – include: basketball, baseball, hockey, football, lacrosse, fencing, paintball, water polo, racquetball, soccer, downhill skiing. In baseball, most eye injuries result from the ball hitting the eye. Batters are the most common victims, though pitchers and outfielders can also be injured. In basketball, most eye injuries result from the eyes being poked by fingers and elbows.

Athletes participating in high-risk sports – especially young athletes – should wear appropriate sport-specific protective eyewear as recommended and properly fitted by an Eye M.D. or other eye care professional. Athletes today can choose from various types of lightweight and sturdy protective eyewear that look and fit better than in the past.

Eyewear properly fitted and worn does not hinder performance in any way, and can prevent 90 percent of sports eye injuries. Many professional athletes excel in their sports while wearing protective eyewear. In Canada, eye injuries decreased by 90 percent after certified full-face protectors attached to the headgear were made mandatory in organized amateur hockey.

Protective eyewear lenses should be made of polycarbonate, which is 20 times stronger than typical eyewear lenses. Polycarbonate can withstand impact from a ball or other projectile traveling at 90 miles per hour. Contact lenses offer no protection, and street wear glasses are inadequate to protect against any type of eye injury.

Because many children’s sports leagues, schools and teams don’t require children to wear eye protection, parents must insist that children wear eye protection every time they play and set a good example by wearing eye protection themselves whenever they play sports.

In addition, parents can get involved at the local level and help pass ordinances that require children under the age of 16 to wear batting helmets with protective face shields when playing baseball, as the City of Baltimore did recently. Also, parents can work to mandate the use of softer baseballs, which are available (and would cause fewer head injuries), but are generally not used. Similar requirements could be applied to other sports as well. The important thing is to take active, preventive steps to ensure that we all protect our most valuable sense – sight.

Dr. Hamill, associate professor of ophthalmology at Baylor College of Medicine, is a spokesperson for the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the Eye M.D. Association, and chairman of the Academy’s Eye Safety and Sports Ophthalmology Committee.

