

NorthJersey.com



Cresskill may take part in testing for brain injuries

Thursday, December 31, 2009

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Cresskill – Brain injuries have become more prominent in the news over the last couple of years and area districts are taking steps to ensure the safety of their student athletes.

Immediate Post-Concussion Assessment and Cognitive Testing (ImPACT) is currently being used to determine if high school, college and professional athletes have suffered concussions or other brain injuries.

Developed at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, the test is being considered by the Cresskill Board of Education for their high school athletes.

At the Dec. 7 Cresskill Board of Education meeting, Superintendent Loretta Bellina asked for the high school's athletic trainer, Anthony DeMarco to investigate the software program further.

ImPACT offers a baseline in the case of a high school athlete suffering from a concussion. The student takes the test before the season starts for the baseline. After impact, the student takes it again and then several days later. The process continues until the students' mental functioning is considered intact.

Concussions, which occur following bone-jarring hits in football, can also happen during almost any other conceivable sport. Football and soccer tend to have the most concussions, according to James Maison, Tenafly High School's athletic trainer.

Symptoms from a concussion range from chronic headaches to fatigue and sleep difficulties.

The test has been a boon to student athletes at Northern Valley Regional High School at Demarest and Tenafly, athletic trainers said. Old Tappan is just beginning to use the test. The test looks at processing speed, visual memory and verbal memory, Maison said.

"It is not the be all, end all," Maison said. "It is another tool in the bag of tricks [used to assess brain injuries]." Tenafly High School has used the test for four years, he said.

Maison explained the protocol following a possible concussion.

The trainer asks a series of memory questions, followed by balance testing similar to a sobriety test and then asks the athlete to remember words over a period of time.

Next, parents are contacted. The student is encouraged to see his or her family doctor the same day. The athletic trainer then receives written instructions from the physician, Maison said.

An athlete is supposed to stay out of any sporting events for at least seven days. The ImPACT test is usually first given within two days of the incident. Then the test is administered three or four days after the incident and then finally seven days later. To return to playing, students must ultimately pass the test. "It's good to see that knowledge of head injuries is becoming more commonplace," Maison said. "The best prevention is education."

There are some problems with students trying to manipulate the test.

Sometimes teenage athletes purposely do poorly on the initial test to guarantee that they won't lose playing time. This is known by athletic trainers as "sandbagging."

Maison speculated on the reasoning for this tactic.

"They [high school students] feel indestructible, and ignore what adults may tell them," Maison said. "Kids grow up and mature, they realize how important [this testing] is."

Teachers are also involved in the recovery process after a concussion.

Maison sends an e-mail to the teachers surveying them on the symptoms they observe of the students for more feedback on four areas — reaction time, thought speed, verbal memory and visual memory.

Northern Valley Regional High School at Demarest athletic trainer Bradley Foley said that the school is in the midst of using the program for the first year.

There were about 12 to 15 concussions in football this past year, and two in other fall sports.

"I think it is great software," Foley said. "It's a better way of tracking the kids

with concussions."

The issue of concussions has continued to get more press, especially as brain injuries relate to professional sports, particularly football.

"Later in life, after National Football League players are done playing, [these concussions and brain injuries] can lead to dementia. There is more software and press about it," Foley said. "More high-caliber athletes are getting more severe concussions."

Tom Kaechele, athletic director at Northern Valley Regional High School at Old Tappan said that while concussions in professional sports get attention, these hits are happening to younger athletes in high school, when the student athlete's brain is still developing.

Old Tappan received the ImPACT test last month and is now in the midst of a trial period for their winter sports.

Kaechele said that soccer players going for headers can lead to brain injuries. Soccer players only wear shin pads, unlike football or ice hockey players who wear protective headgear.

"Athletes are getting better and better. They are getting stronger and faster," Kaechele said as a reason why the collisions can lead to injuries.

Melissa Nelson, first year athletic trainer at Old Tappan, has seen the program in use in Massachusetts.

"It's helpful in the fact that it goes beyond the classic signs and symptoms," Nelson said. "Even though they may not have the headache, it does not mean the brain is fully healed."

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