

OPEN AND SHUT CASE

There is plenty of available evidence to support the use of a mouth guard for all youth hockey players.



Available Evidence Supports Use Of Mouth Guard By All Hockey Players

/// by Jeff Lamb, Aynsley M. Smith, David A. Krause, Logan Breu and Michael J. Stuart



The first generation of mouth guards in the 1930s were worn exclusively by boxers to protect their mouths, teeth and jaws. Today, mouth guards are worn by athletes playing a variety of sports to protect them from orofacial injuries as well as concussions.

Mouth guards reduce the risk and severity of orofacial injuries, but it is also believed that a well-fit mouth guard may help prevent concussions.

A recent study of youth hockey players reported that off-the-shelf mouth guards lowered the odds of sustaining a concussion by 69 percent. Another study of 195 collegiate athletes in contact/collision sports other than ice hockey suggested mouth guard use may offer benefit in preventing sports related concussions.

The available evidence supports the use of a mouth guard for all youth hockey players.

USA Hockey Rule 304 states that “All players, including goalkeepers, in the 12 and under through youth 18 and under (including high school) age classifications are required to wear a colored (non-clear) internal mouthpiece that covers all remaining teeth of one jaw, customarily the upper. It is strongly recommended, that in all age classifications, every player should wear a mouthpiece form fitted by a dentist.”

Despite strong recommendations and this clearly stated rule, mouth guard compliance is poor and rule enforcement is inconsistent. An unpublished survey of high school hockey players revealed that only 50 percent of players wear a mouth guard during games.

When asked about mouth guard compliance and perceived efficacy in collegiate athletes, 93 percent of the NCCA athletic trainers surveyed said they valued the mouth guard's role in the prevention of injury. However, only 63 percent of the players consistently wore a mouth guard during games.

The NCAA and USA Hockey mouth guard requirement at these levels of participation may not be adequately emphasized by coaches, parents and athletic trainers or consistently penalized by game officials.

What are the barriers that contribute to this lack of mouth guard compliance? **Hockey players between the ages of 9 and 12 years were asked why they chose not to wear mouth guards:**



These legitimate concerns can be addressed by choosing a custom, well-fit mouth guard as recommended by USA Hockey. The mouth guard should securely cover the teeth of the upper jaw in order to minimize issues related to comfort, breathing and communication.

Ideally, a form-fit mouth guard from a dentist should be worn, but off-the-shelf options molded at home have improved tremendously in recent years.

Enhancing mouth guard compliance in youth hockey begins with education. The decreased risk and severity of orofacial injuries and a possible role in the prevention of concussion should be communicated to all players, parents and coaches.

Officials should enforce Rule 304 despite the challenges to determine if all players are wearing a mouth guard. One strategy to ensure compliance is to assemble all the players on the blue line for a brief equipment check prior to each game.

The consequences for violating rule 304 include: “For the first violation of this rule, the team shall be issued a warning. A misconduct penalty for an equipment violation shall be assessed to any player or goalkeeper on that team for a subsequent violation during that game.”

Increasing the penalty for non-compliance would most certainly increase mouth guard use. For example, a 10-minute misconduct for the player and a two-minute bench minor for the violating team,



Properly wearing a mouth guard helps prevent orofacial injuries and concussions.

announced at the start of the game, would get the attention of most any youth player or coach.

Officials would be encouraged to spot check as necessary during stoppages of play. A player complaining to an official about a call would provide an easy opportunity for the official to check mouth guard compliance.

The benefits of wearing a mouth guard in youth hockey are far too great to be overlooked. All hockey stakeholders must collaborate and strive for 100 percent compliance through education, prioritization, and rule enforcement. ☆

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