



As the spring sports season kicks off in schools across the country, players, parents, coaches and athletic trainers need to be especially cognizant of the signs and symptoms of concussion, and how to properly manage the injury. NeuroRestorative News sat down with Dr. Neal McGrath, consulting Neuropsychologist for NeuroRestorative, to discuss his work in concussion management. Dr. McGrath is also the Clinical Director and founder of Sports Concussion New England, an organization dedicated to concussion management for student athletes through education, neuropsychological assessment, academic support and return-to-play consultation. He specializes in the evaluation and rehabilitation of traumatic brain injuries and has over 25 years of clinical experience.

AskTheExpert

Q&A with Dr. Neal McGrath on Concussion Management in Sports

NeuroRestorative: How did you become interested in concussion management for kids involved in sports?

Dr. McGrath: Nine years ago my son suffered a concussion while playing high school varsity football. He recovered fully, but it was difficult to know when it was safe for him to return to play. Through this experience, I realized that there was a real need for concussion management education and training for school staff, parents and student athletes. I started off by doing a one-year volunteer pilot program at Brookline High School in Massachusetts and I now work with over 30 schools as well as with individual student athletes throughout New England.

NeuroRestorative: How serious are concussions?

Dr. McGrath: Concussions are in fact a type of traumatic brain injury and can be very serious. Although most people who suffer concussions recover fully, the effects of the injury can last weeks, months or even longer. It is vital that the concussion is managed properly to ensure a successful recovery.

NeuroRestorative: Is there a basic protocol that people should follow in managing a concussion?

Dr. McGrath: There are five key steps to concussion Management:

1. Education for players, coaches, parents and school staff
2. Baseline testing with ImPACT software (Immediate Post-Concussion Assessment and Cognitive Testing)
3. Post-concussion evaluation
4. Academic support during recovery
5. Return-to-play decision support

NeuroRestorative: There seems to be a lot more coverage in the news these days about the dangers of concussion in sports. Have you noticed a change in the level of awareness of this issue?

Dr. McGrath: There has been a surge of media coverage of concussion in sports over the last several years, the precipice of which was the passing of the Lystedt Law in Washington state in 2009. The law, named after Zackery Lystedt, a young athlete who was permanently disabled after sustaining a concussion in 2006 and prematurely returned to play, requires that any youth in Washington state showing signs of a concussion be examined and cleared by a licensed health care provider. Since the bill was passed, other states have followed suit, including Massachusetts in 2010, where I conduct most of my work. I now work with schools in Massachusetts to help them understand their obligations under this law, including mandatory concussion education for players, parents and coaches, immediate removal from play if a concussion is suspected, and medical clearance for athletes to return to play.

NeuroRestorative: What one piece of advice do you have for parents, teachers and student athletes about managing concussions?

Dr. McGrath: Just wearing a helmet does not stop a concussion. People need to understand the signs, symptoms and risks, and how to properly manage concussions to prevent serious long-term effects.

What to do if you suspect a concussion

1. Obtain medical consultation. Athletes who have been unconscious, even briefly, should be taken to a hospital or doctor's office for evaluation to rule out conditions such as bleeding in the brain or fractures. For concussions not involving loss of consciousness, families will usually call their child's primary care doctor right away to report symptoms and status. Your doctor will then advise you as to whether your child should be seen in a hospital emergency department, at the doctor's office, or monitored at home.
2. Rest is the main treatment for a concussion. Doing as little as possible will allow symptoms to begin clearing.
3. Make sure your child receives a proper evaluation by a specialist who understands current thinking and practices in sports concussion management.

About Dr. Neal McGrath

In addition to serving as consulting Neuropsychologist for NeuroRestorative, and Clinical Director and founder of Sports Concussion New England, Dr. McGrath consults for the Massachusetts Statewide Head Injury Program and the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission.