



SOFT HEADGEAR IN NON-HELMETED SPORTS POSITION STATEMENT

National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) Sports Medicine Advisory Committee (SMAC)

There is currently limited medical evidence to support the use of soft headgear products to reduce the risk of concussion. Their design and recommended uses do not fully address the suspected mechanisms of concussive injury such as acceleration, deceleration, and rotational forces acting upon the brain. The permissive use of soft headgear in some non-helmeted sports is allowed, but the primary intent of the usage should not be concussion prevention.

A recent study of girls' lacrosse players reported that state headgear mandates were associated with lower concussion rates. Conversely, a randomized study of high school soccer players showed no reduction in concussion risk among boys wearing soft headgear but did show they may be effective in reducing concussion risk in girls.

The use of soft headgear may produce unintended consequences, including providing a false sense of security to athletes. This false sense of security may result in athletes, coaches, and parents/guardians, placing less emphasis upon other strategies that include, but are not limited to: avoidance of head impact and foul play, core and neck strengthening, concussion education, and the immediate reporting of concussion symptoms.

The NFHS SMAC is aware of reports of athletes with a history of concussions being returned to play contact sports wearing soft headgear in an attempt to lessen further concussion risk. The NFHS SMAC strongly advises against using soft headgear as a justification to permit medical clearance of an athlete who would otherwise not be medically cleared to participate in a contact sport. However, soft headgear may be used to cover soft tissue injuries (such as lacerations and sutures) if deemed appropriate within the sport's playing rules.

When considering the use of soft headgear in non-helmeted sports, athletes, parents/guardians, and coaches should evaluate the available literature and read the manufacturers' instructions that address specific limitations in preventing injuries to the head and brain. Additionally, they should read the warning labels and should monitor that the equipment is being used as intended.

Valid scientific research should continue to be pursued to determine the ability of soft headgear to decrease the incidence of concussion. The NFHS SMAC will continue to monitor research and will consider revision of this position statement should significant evidence arise.

In summary, protective headgear is required by NFHS rules in some sports and permitted in others. Hard helmets may reduce the incidence of certain head injuries, such as skull fractures and subdural hematomas. Soft headgear may help protect against cuts and bruises to the scalp and forehead. Coaches, athletes and parents/guardians should carefully review manufacturers' warnings regarding proper use and the performance limitations of protective equipment. **No helmet or headgear can eliminate the risk of concussion. All sports must be played, coached, and officiated with that understanding.**

References:

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