

Football Helmet Removal

Each year, thousands of head and neck injuries occur to football players of all skill levels. Such sports injuries are among the most dreaded because they can cause paralysis or death. Football players suffering neck injuries must be properly managed to prevent further injury. Presently, the protocol for football helmet removal differs among sports medical and emergency medical personnel.

The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) strongly advises against removing the helmet from an unconscious athlete or from an athlete who has sustained a neck injury. Medical personnel should suspect that any unconscious athlete has an accompanying spinal injury until proven otherwise, because head and neck trauma frequently occur together. Proper immobilization of the spine and safe transportation to the hospital can be accomplished without removal of the helmet because, unlike motorcycle helmets, football helmets fit snugly and prevent head movement within the helmet.

When it is necessary to gain access to the athlete's face for cardiopulmonary resuscitation, airway management, or for other reasons, ACSM advises that only the face mask be removed from the helmet and that the helmet be left in place. The plastic straps that secure the face mask to the helmet can be easily removed with specifically designed tools. These tools should be readily available during both practices and games. Removing the face mask provides immediate access to the athlete's airway and face, and allows emergency medical personnel to assess vital signs, provide initial care for facial injury, or initiate resuscitation. The helmet itself should be removed only if the rescuer is unable to gain access to the airway by any other means.

Furthermore, if the rescuer removes the face mask and not the entire helmet, the head will remain in a neutral position. If the helmet were to be removed, the athlete's head might hyperextend, particularly when the athlete is wearing shoulder pads. ACSM also advises that only trained personnel, with proper equipment, attempt to move an injured player, place him/her on a spine board, and transport the athlete to a hospital.

ACSM suggests that team physicians, athletic trainers, coaches, and concerned parents meet with emergency care providers to develop a protocol for the safe transportation of critically injured athletes, which should include the practice of leaving the helmet in place.

While head and neck injuries may continue to be a life-threatening injury, ACSM contends that proper management of such injuries may prevent further injury from occurring. Proper management includes leaving the helmet in place if at all possible; removing only the face mask if access to the face is required, and using expert sports medical personnel to develop a plan to manage head-and-neck-injured athletes.

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