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Opinion: Beware jaw injuries from summer activities

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Aug. 7, 2022



A jet-skier cruises out of Greenwich Cove into Long Island Sound.

File photo

Summer sports typically bring on an increase in athletic-related injuries. Jaw issues, in particular, often go unnoticed. As well, the symptoms of headache, jaw fatigue, ear pain, ear “fullness,” neck pain and a sense of imbalance are often attributed to other ailments or injuries.

Injuries to the jaw bone impact on the jaw joints, called temporomandibular joints. The mandible is one bone connected to the base of the skull on the right and left sides at these joints. Any event that causes torquing of the mandible on one side impacts on both sides at the temporomandibular joints. Above the upper part of the jaw bone sits a cartilaginous disc that can be slipped out of place. When that happens, the nerves in the mouth and in the facial area get pinched causing pain and limited jaw function.

Prompt recognition and treatment of these injuries can help prevent years of undiagnosed pain and suffering with arthritis.

These jaw injuries can occur in the physically fit as well as those not physically conditioned. That is, it can happen to anyone.

Some of the injuries are associated with summer activities. Here are some examples.

Diving can cause jaw injury when the person’s face smacks directly at the water. Unpredictable winds when sailing can cause traumatic head and jaw injuries when the sail and its mechanism sway uncontrollably, striking the upper portion of the sailor.

The chin straps on sports helmets can shift with impact against the helmet, injuring the jaw.

In wrestling, invariably someone is immobilized by the force of a head lock in a contorted position. Wrestling is well known to be associated with concussive as well as torquing of jaw bone and cervical spine.

Even without an obvious accident, jaw damage can occur. For example, individuals tend to clench and grit their teeth when water skiing, putting forces of as much as 200 pounds per square inch on the jaw joint system. Bicycle enthusiasts are often seen with heavy backpacks that cause the jaw and neck to be in a very strained position. Abruptly having to stop throws the entire system dangerously out of alignment. Being hunched forward on some of the newer stationary bikes can cause a compression of the jaw and neck structures triggering a problem with the jaw.

In chronic cases, particularly when there is jaw locking, an MRI now is the standard in understanding the patient's problem and addressing the solution. Based upon MRI findings, personalized appliances can be fabricated to help restore the jaw to its proper position. Injections into the related areas of nerve irritation can help ease pain and eliminate headaches.

The risk of jaw injury clearly should not severely limit participation in summer outdoor activities, of course. However, the scraped knee from a fall might be accompanied by a less obvious injury. And that is something we all should keep in the back of our minds.

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