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Opinion:
Summer sports tend to spike jaw injuries

By Patricia A. Richard, MD

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Illustration of a girl riding a bicycle and a boy preparing to dive against a background of warning stripes.
Ray Bubel/KRT

Summer is coming and that means youngsters will be more active in a variety of sports. The result: more kids will get jaw injuries and many won't recognize that the jaw needs to be treated.

Headache, jaw fatique, ear pain, ear "fullness," neck pain and a sense of imbalance are often attributed to other ailments or injuries — rather than injury to the jaw.

Whether you are in tip-top physical condition or your physical condition leaves much to be desired, jaw injuries can happen to anyone — and not just those playing competitive sports.

Even diving off of a low board into a swimming pool can hurt the jaw if the person's face smacks against the water just so. Sailors, too, beware of the unexpectedly swinging boom. Even those on bicycles can sustain jaw injuries when a fall shifts the helmet resulting in a blow to the jaw.

They are called temporomandibular joints. A bone is connected to the base of the skull on the right and left sides at these joints. Any event that causes torquing 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 can help prevent years of undiagnosed or misdiagnosed pain and suffering.

Millions of people in the United States are affected by jaw pain which can be mild or so severe it impacts your quality of life. Jaw pain may be mild or can be severe and affect your quality of life. Many factors can cause it, in additional to accidents, including grinding your teeth, gum disease or a toothache.

A scrapped knee is obvious. A simple bandage may be all that's needed. A bump on the head or a twist of the neck, on the other hand, may result in injuries that are now so obvious.

Interestingly, even without an accident, an individual can damage the jaw.

Do you tightly grit your teeth when water skiing? Many people do and that can put forces of as much is 200 pounds per square inch on the jaw joint system. Heavy backpacks worn while bike riding cause the jaw and neck to be in a very strained position. Abruptly having to stop can throw the entire system out of alignment. Even being hunched forward on some of stationary bikes can cause a compression of the jaw and neck structures, sometimes triggering a jaw problem.

How is the problem treated? Typically, it starts with an MRI so the doctor can get a clear understanding the patient's problem. 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.

Of course, the risk of jaw injury should not put a significant crimp on participation in summer outdoor — or indoor — activities. So, hit that baseball or dive into the pool. Just be mindful of the potential for jaw injury if an accident, for example, is followed by discomfort to the jaw.

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