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## Children with ADHD should avoid contact sports, study recommends



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Children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder should avoid playing contact sports because they are more likely to have difficulty recovering from head injuries, according to a new study.

The study, published Tuesday in the *Journal of Neurosurgery: Pediatrics*, found that children with ADHD have a much greater chance of experiencing moderate disability after a mild traumatic brain injury from incidents such as car accidents, falls and sports.

Dr. Stephanie Greene, an assistant professor of neurological surgery at the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, undertook the investigation after noticing that her own patients with ADHD who suffered head injuries such as concussions did not recover as easily as children who do not have the behavioral disorder. Children with ADHD are often prone to such injuries because its symptoms include hyperactivity, increased impulsivity and risk-taking.

"I noticed that the patients with ADHD were having a much harder time when they came back after 4 to 6 weeks than the other patients who were mostly recovered by that stage," Greene said by phone Wednesday. "I think the important thing to note here is if you have a child with ADHD, you may be in for a longer recovery period."

Greene said parents can be proactive in preventing children with ADHD from suffering such injuries by encouraging them to participate in non-contact sports such as swimming, tennis or golf.

"If you're looking for the safest way to raise your child with ADHD to adulthood, I would steer them away from head-injury-prone activities," Greene said. "You can still get a head injury from playing baseball, but it's less likely than in football or hockey."

In a 2007 survey, parents reported that approximately 9.5 percent of children between the ages of 4 and 17 have been diagnosed with ADHD, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The diagnosis rate increased an average of 3 percent per year from 1997 to 2006 and an average of 5.5 percent per year from 2003 to 2007.

Greene and her coworkers undertook the study by reviewing the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh's medical records for each of the 48 patients with ADHD who been diagnosed with a mild traumatic brain injury between 2003 and 2010. They compared the records with those of 45 children without ADHD who had sustained similar injuries.

The results showed 25 percent of the children with ADHD suffered from moderate disability due to the injury and 56 percent had recovered completely after a six-month period. By comparison, only 2 percent of the children without ADHD experienced moderate disability and 84 percent recovered completely within a much shorter period of seven weeks. The researchers defined moderate disability as needing supervision or help for physical or behavioral problems or suffering from learning or behavioral problems.

While children with ADHD already have trouble with memory, concentration and impulse control, those in the study who experienced disability following their injuries were "no longer able to function at the level that they were functioning previously," Greene said. Since some symptoms of traumatic brain injury, such as disinhibited behavior and impaired memory, are similar to those of ADHD, it's possible that a traumatic brain injury compounds problems that are already present.

Dr. Andrew Adesman, chief of developmental and behavioral pediatrics at Steven and Alexandra Cohen Children's Medical Center of New York, said that while the study was well done, it's too soon to advise parents of children with ADHD keep their kids out of contact sports.

"I think it's possible that may be a recommendation worth considering, but I think it's premature until a study like this is replicated," Adesman said by phone Wednesday.

Often physical activity and sports can be helpful to children with ADHD, since the activity can serve as a release for some of their excess energy, Adesman said.

"On the one hand we want to prevent head injuries, but on the other hand we don't want to take away opportunities," Adesman said.

Greene's study also recommended that medication could be useful in preventing children with ADHD from sustaining traumatic head injuries. While Adesman called the conclusion speculative, he said parents may want to consider it, since some choose to medicate their children only during school days. If medication reduces the risk of such injuries by decreasing impulsivity in a child with ADHD, it would be useful both on weekdays and weekends, when children may be engaged in physical activity, he said.

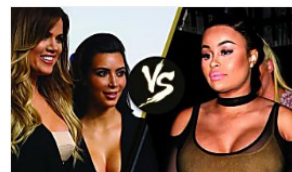
"It's not unreasonable to think that medication may reduce head injury," Adesman said.

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