

Report Tracks Injury Rates in College Sports Over 16 Years

By ERIK VANCE
The Chronicle of Higher Education
May 23, 2007

Head injuries have become increasingly common in college sports like basketball, according to a new report released on Tuesday. Its findings, which detail all injuries from 15 college sports, could help athletics officials reduce injury rates.

The report, published as a special edition of the National Athletic Trainers' Association's *Journal of Athletic Training*, is based on a collaboration between the association and the NCAA that tracked injury rates in a variety of college sports over a 16-year period ending in 2004.

Among its findings, the report indicates that injury rates are highest during regular-season games. The second-highest rates occurred during preseason practices, which were two to three times higher than in regular-season practices.

Jennifer M. Hootman, one of the editors of the report, said in an interview that knowing when and where most injuries occur tells regulators where to focus their energy when drafting policies designed to reduce injury rates.

According to the report, most collegiate sports injuries happen below the waist, and the sport with the most injuries is football.

The single most common injury is the ankle sprain, which made up almost 15 percent of all injuries.

"It's really amazing the number of ankle sprains across sports," Ms. Hootman said. "It's usually not career-ending, but some people who repeatedly sprain their ankles have long-term problems."

Although overall injury rates have stayed the same since 1988, rates for several specific types of injury have gone up. Concussions, for example, have grown an average of 7 percent per year. The past 10 years have seen a surge in concussion research, and Ms. Hootman said some of the apparent increase in the number of concussions may result from athletic trainers and doctors getting better at spotting them.

Paul E. Plummer, executive director of the athletic-training program at Indiana State University, said the report's findings would help him change how he approaches sports like basketball.

"The hands are in contact with a basketball 40 minutes of every game, yet the injury rate for the hand was less than the head in basketball," Mr. Plummer said. "So it just kind of shifts you from the intuitive to seeing what really happens."

He said he is more likely to treat a basketball game more like a football game, with a high probability for injuries like concussions.

Ms. Hootman also hoped the work would lead to rules changes that would help reduce sports-related injuries. She pointed to preseason football, where her data suggest that a 2003 NCAA rule requiring at least 25 practice days before an intercollegiate game led to a drop-off in injuries by giving players the chance to warm up.

Beyond policy recommendations, the report also lists several ways individual programs can cut down on injuries, including the use of ankle braces and special balance-strengthening exercises.