

Report recommends changes to make sports safer

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INDIANAPOLIS -- Hard-hitting sports like football and men's hockey continue to have the highest injury rates, and contact is even the primary cause of injury in less-physical sports, a study of 16 years of NCAA data found.

Women's ice hockey, for example, does not allow the body checking permitted in the men's hockey, but about half the injuries in women's hockey came from contact with another player. Concussions were the most common injury in games and practices.

"They're not falling down and getting these concussions," said Randall Dick, one of the study's authors and associate director of research for the NCAA.

The study, published in a special spring issue of the Journal of Athletic Training, looked at injury data for 15 sports. Information was collected between 1988 and 2004 by the NCAA and the National Athletic Trainers Association.

Among other findings the study reported:

- More than half of all injuries were to the lower extremities.
- Injury rates were two to three times higher during preseason practices than during the regular season.
- Rates of concussions increased from .17 per 1,000 athlete exposures in 1988-89 to .34 per 1,000 exposures in 2003-04. An exposure is every time an athlete participates in a game. Authors attributed the increase in part to improved reporting and identification of concussions.
- Several sports showed declines in game injuries, including women's gymnastics, basketball and field hockey.

The report recommended ways to make each sport safer, from improving conditioning and better taping of ankles to considering breakaway bases in baseball to prevent sliding injuries. In men's wrestling, skin infections proved to be a larger problem than previously thought, with about 20 percent of practice injuries related to skin infections. The report recommended better hygiene, for wrestlers and the mats.

"We always knew it was a problem, but it's a pretty big problem," said Jennifer Hootman, another study author.

Overall, the authors said, the study showed college sports are safe, and it will be up to the NCAA to decide whether changes are needed.

In the past, injury data have been used to modify preseason football rules to reduce heat illness and guide efforts to reduce concussions in ice hockey.

The study's authors said examining injury data can keep student athletes safer, a challenging goal as participation in college athletics grew 20 percent for men and 80 percent for women during the period surveyed.

"We've had a huge growth in athletics," said Robert Howard, head athletic trainer at the University of Connecticut.