For teens, when is it safe to play again after a concussion?
By Kansas City Star, adapted by Newsela staff
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Mychal Shaw poses for a portrait on Oct. 17, 2014, at Lee’s Summit North High School in Lee’s Summit, Missouri. A year ago, Shaw suffered a concussion during a football game and had serious problems as a result of the head injury, but has decided to continue his football career.

On a cool October morning, Mychal Shaw emerges from his bedroom. He pulls a Lee’s Summit North High School shirt over his head and joins his family in the kitchen for a morning prayer.

“We pray that you keep him safe in his football game tonight and let the angels watch over him,” says his mother Ryana. She says the prayer each week on Mychal’s game days.

A year ago, during a game, Mychal suffered a brain injury called a concussion. He was temporarily unable to walk or speak. Memory loss followed, forcing him to drop two high school classes. Extreme sensitivity to light and sound prevented him from attending his team’s games, even as a spectator.

This season, though, he’s back on the field, a senior for the Broncos.

“We All Worry”

Nearly 1,500 high school football players in Missouri suffered concussions in 2012. Most of them returned to action within two weeks, according to Missouri high school officials.
The attention given to concussions has never been more intense.

But what happens afterward is less certain. There is no agreement on when a high school player is ready to return to the football field after suffering a head injury.

“I think we all worry about sending a kid back out there too soon. Any doctor who says otherwise is lying,” said Greg Canty, director of the Center for Sports Medicine at Children’s Mercy Hospital in Kansas City.

There were 17 deaths across all levels of football in 2013. All 17 were high school athletes.

Doctors said they are even more concerned with “second-impact syndrome.” The often fatal condition occurs when a player suffers a second concussion before the first has healed.

“Once you have the symptoms, the brain is more fragile,” Canty said. A second hit could “result in potentially catastrophic injury,” he said.

**Where Teens Face The Most Danger**

Youths face the most danger of second-impact syndrome because their brains are still maturing, says Brett Osborn. He is a brain surgeon who has studied concussions in sports.

High school players receive inconsistent treatment for concussions.

Brian Mahaffey wrote an article about concussions in the journal Missouri Medicine last year. He advises that high school athletes should be symptom-free for seven days before returning to the practice field. An athlete of middle school age should wait 10 days after all symptoms have disappeared, he said.

Osborn recommends that a child sit out at least six weeks after suffering a concussion, even if it’s mild.

State law isn’t so cautious.

Missouri says a player must be removed from competition for only 24 hours before evaluation. Kansas has no such timetable.

A player who has suffered a concussion immediately becomes more likely to suffer another one. As a result, Mahaffey suggests to some patients they quit football. But determining that proper stopping point is often guesswork.
Alex And Andy Pulled From Football

Barb Kunz’s son Alex took a helmet-to-helmet hit during an Olathe South practice in 2013. He was knocked backward but never lost consciousness. A day later, Alex was having trouble comprehending basic ideas in math class. He remembers walking to the cafeteria for lunch feeling confused.

As he sat down for lunch, he shook his two milk cartons—as he did every day. But this time, he had opened the cartons before shaking them and milk sprayed everywhere.

“It took me a good half second before I realized I was showering myself with milk,” he said.

Alex left school 20 minutes later to see a doctor, who diagnosed him with a concussion. His mother forbade him from ever taking the field again and his brother Andy was also pulled from the Olathe South team.

Playing It Safe During A Game

On the first play of his 2014 season, Liberty High School defender Josh Watson sprinted toward the line of scrimmage. There, he met the opposing tailback.

Bang.

The hit was enough to send Watson to the turf, where he remained before needing a trainer’s assistance to walk to the sideline.

Watson begged the team’s trainers to return the game, but they thought he displayed signs of a concussion. That spelled the end of his playing time in the season opener.

“That decision is out of my hands. It’s not me making the call,” Liberty coach Chad Frigon said.

“And that’s a good thing. As a coach, I want to win and put him back in the game.”

There are new rules for rejoining the team, which Watson did the following Wednesday, after it was determined he did not have a concussion.

“Need More And Better Evidence”

Several area high schools in Missouri and Kansas, as well as a handful of middle schools, have added a new program. Players take a computerized assessment before the season, which gives them a baseline score.
If a player is later thought to have had some sort of head injury, he takes the test again and the scores are compared.

“Computerized tests can offer a false confidence,” Canty said. “A player passes the test and he’s often determined to be fine. Many times we need more and better evidence to support that determination.”
Quiz

1. According to the article, all of the following are symptoms of concussions EXCEPT:
   (a) sensitivity to light
   (b) sensitivity to sound
   (c) trouble making quick decisions
   (d) trouble figuring out basic concepts

2. Select the paragraph from the section “We All Worry” that shows that, earlier, not much thought was given to when it’s safe for kids to play again.

3. Select the option that BEST gives an accurate summary of the article.
   (a) An increase in cases of “second-impact syndrome” has meant that coaches, parents and schools are far more cautious before letting players rejoin teams.
   (b) An increase in concussion cases over the past years has led to greater awareness and care is being taken before allowing players to return to play.
   (c) Football can lead to concussions or even fatal brain damage and even experts are not sure when it’s safe to return to play.
   (d) Due to increased awareness, schools are conducting computerized tests before a player returns to the field.

4. Select the sentence from the article that is LEAST important to include in its summary.
   (a) There is no agreement on when a high school player is ready to return to the football field after suffering a head injury.
   (b) High school players receive inconsistent treatment for concussions.
   (c) Brian Mahaffey wrote an article about concussions in the journal Missouri Medicine last year.
   (d) Osborn recommends that a child sit out at least six weeks after suffering a concussion, even if it’s mild.
Answer Key

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