

Accidents take bigger toll than checks in hockey

Hits account for only 34% of injuries

BY LINDA NGUYEN, POSTMEDIA NEWS JULY 31, 2010

Accidents are more commonly to blame for on-ice amateur-hockey injuries than bodychecking, suggests a study recently published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine.

The findings were based on a five-year study of 3,000 boys age 4 to 18 in a youth hockey program in Burlington, Ont.

It found that 66 per cent of overall injuries were the result of such accidents as colliding with teammates, sliding into the boards or posts or getting hit with the puck. The remaining 34 per cent of injuries were attributed to players checking each other.

The researchers, from the University of Buffalo, took into account only injuries serious enough to cause players to be off the ice for at least 24 hours.

"There is an image of bodychecking as a form of violence that is condoned by the game of hockey," Barry Willer, a senior author of the study, said in a statement. "However, this study found that bodychecking did not account for a large proportion of injuries. Perhaps as important, bodychecking did not lead to a rise in intentional injuries."

Overall, the study found the accidental injuries were more serious in nature than those caused by intentional hits.

The findings included data from players from three levels of competition, including those in house leagues, where there is no bodychecking; select, where players age 11 and older are allowed to check; and representative, where checking is allowed for skilled players age 9 and older.

Researchers found that as the skill level of the players went up, the rate of accidental and intentional injuries increased during games. It was a different story during practices, where rates of injuries remained low across all skill levels.

"The study does suggest that, regardless of whether young players are allowed to bodycheck, unintentional contact with the boards, the ice or other players are important sources of serious, unintended injury," said Willer. "To avoid these accidents, hockey coaches must teach players to keep their heads up, rather than looking down at the puck."

Hockey Canada, the national organization governing the sport, said that on-ice injuries should be expected.

"In the game of hockey, there will always be injuries," said spokesman Todd Jackson.

"But we have to be able to reduce the number of catastrophic injuries and come up with ways to develop a mechanism to get minor injuries down as well."

Jackson said it is up to individual leagues to determine what policy they want to implement on bodychecking, but the organization encourages fair play.

"A big part of preventing injuries is how the game is played," he said. "There needs to be a rules and respect factor by both players, coaches, everyone involved -even the parents."

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette