

Accidents cause more injuries in hockey than checking: Study

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While bone-crunching bodychecks in hockey can sometimes be difficult to watch, a new U.S. study says it's actually accidents that cause the most injuries in youth hockey.

"There is an image of bodychecking as a form of violence that is condoned by the game of hockey," senior study author Dr. Barry Willer said in a release. "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."

University of Buffalo researchers looked at an ice hockey youth program in Burlington, Ont., and compared injury rates overall for three levels of competition: house leagues where checking is not permitted, select leagues where children 11 and older can check, and representative leagues, which allows the most skilled players to check at age nine and up.

They also looked at injury rates as age and competition levels increased. In total, the study looked at 3,000 boys between the ages of four and 18 and only injuries that kept a player off the ice for at least 24 hours were included.

Their analysis showed there were three times more accidental injuries than bodychecking injuries in the house leagues — 92 versus 30. These accidents were likely caused by players not playing "heads up" hockey, instead looking at the ice or the puck, Willer said.

The select league only had 28 injuries total, but more than half were intentional.

In the experienced league, researchers found 59% of the 96 injuries were unintentional. They also discovered, however, that the experienced league also had the highest number of intentional injuries (39) than all the other levels of competition.

"Game injuries were much more frequent among the highly skilled players on rep teams," Willer said.

Willer noted the study doesn't answer two important questions: When should bodychecking be allowed in youth hockey, or should it be allowed at all?

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

The study appeared in the British Journal of Sports Medicine.

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