

# The Importance of Mouthguards



by William J. Schlotz, D.D.S.

As a dentist I have seen many preventable dental injuries in young athletes. Fractured teeth and jaws, knocked out teeth and concussions are all common injuries to our children while playing sports. In my practice as a general dentist, I see more sports associated traumatic facial injuries than from any other cause. To back this up statistically, in 1995 Raymond Flanders found that 34% of all basketball injuries involve the face or mouth. Most of these injuries could have been prevented with a sports mouthguard.

A sports mouthguard is made of soft plastic and envelops the teeth, gums and surrounding bone. It is estimated by the American Dental Association, that 200,000 oral facial injuries are prevented each year by the use of athletic mouthguards. Therefore, it is not surprising that many collegiate programs around the country mandate their use.

Unfortunately, for our younger adolescent and teenage children in many athletic programs, mouthguards are not mandatory. According to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, mouthguards protect the head and neck from concussions and jaw fractures. Most concussions occur from a blow to the lower jaw (mandible) that transmits to the base of the skull. A mouthguard cushions the mandible from the traumatic impact of such a blow.

I advocate the use of mouthguards by athletes of all ages, especially participants of contact sports including: football, basketball, soccer, lacrosse, karate, hockey, baseball, and boxing. Even traditional non-contact sports, such as gymnastics, skateboarding, and bicycling would benefit from the extra protection mouthguards provide.

There are three types of mouthguards: stock, boil and bite, and custom made. Stock mouthguards are the least expensive but also the least protective, because they are preformed, ready to wear. These mouthguards do not fit very well and tend to be bulky, and can make breathing difficult. These mouthguards are also the least likely to be worn due to discomfort.

The boil and bite mouthguards are available at many sports stores and also come preformed. These pre-formed shapes are altered by boiling the thermoplastic mouthguard in water and then biting on to the warm plastic surface. These mouthguards provide better retention than the stock mouthguards but also tend to be bulky.

Custom made mouthguards are supplied by dental offices. These are either fabricated in the dentist's office or by a dental laboratory. These are more expensive mouthguards, but also the most comfortable and provide the greatest protection and retention. An impression of the mouth is taken and then a custom-fit mouthguard is fabricated on a plaster replica of the patient's teeth and surrounding tissue.

Nothing is more heartbreaking than seeing an easily preventable dental injury in a child. Unnecessary pain and suffering can easily be averted by the use of these mouthguards. Avoiding the heartache of lost teeth, broken jaws, and possible concussions is obviously important.

Our children are too precious.

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