



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Department of Public Health

**SPORTS-RELATED HEAD INJURY REGULATIONS:
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

August 31, 2011

WHO IS COVERED BY THE REGULATIONS?

1. We are an independent school – are we subject to these regulations?

It depends. The regulations apply to *all public middle and high schools*, and all other schools which are subject to the official rules of the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association (MIAA). If your school is a member of the MIAA, then it is subject to the regulations. However, even if your school is not an MIAA member, you may still decide that you wish to adopt the approach promoted by the regulations for the safety and well-being of your student athletes.

2. We have a band at our school, but they are not a marching band – are they subject to the regulations?

No. The law and the regulations refer only to marching bands.

3. For purposes of these regulations, is cheerleading considered to be an extracurricular activity?

Yes, cheerleading is expressly included in the regulatory definition of an extracurricular athletic activity.

TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

4. We are planning to have a pre-season meeting of parents and students –can we provide concussion training during that meeting?

Yes, definitely. As you know, the regulations require that parents and students, as well as a variety of school personnel, receive DPH-approved concussion training annually. If schools wish to, they can provide this training in a pre-season meeting for parents and students. There are at least two strategies for providing such training in a pre-season meeting:

Schools may offer one of the following on-line trainings: the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) *Heads Up Concussion* training or the National Federation of State High School Association's (NFHS) *Concussion in Sports – What You Need to Know* training. Schools may use the agenda and attendance roster as a record of verification for participants who are trained in this type of group setting.

Alternatively, schools may use DPH approved written training materials to meet the training requirement. The versions for parents and students are available in English and Spanish. If schools distribute these training materials to parents and students at a pre-season meeting, all parents and students should be asked to sign an acknowledgement verifying that they have reviewed the written materials.

The on-line courses can be found at:

- http://www.cdc.gov/concussion/HeadsUp/online_training.html
- <http://www.nfhslearn.com/electiveDetail.aspx?courseID=15000>

The written materials can be found at:

- Student athletes:
 - http://www.cdc.gov/concussion/pdf/Athletes_Fact_Sheet-a.pdf
 - http://www.cdc.gov/concussion/pdf/Athletes_Fact_Sheet_Spanish-a.pdf
- Parents:
 - http://www.cdc.gov/concussion/pdf/Parents_Fact_Sheet-a.pdf
 - http://www.cdc.gov/concussion/pdf/Parents_Fact_Sheet_Spanish-a.pdf
- Coaches:
 - http://www.cdc.gov/concussion/pdf/Coach_Guide-a.pdf
 - http://www.cdc.gov/concussion/pdf/coaches_Engl.pdf
- School nurses: <http://www.cdc.gov/concussion/HeadsUp/schools.html>

5. We would like to have our certified athletic trainer provide the required concussion training to all of our coaches and athletic staff – is that allowed?

Currently, DPH has identified two free, on-line courses that meet the training requirements. CDC written training materials may also be used to meet the training requirement. (See above.) If the certified athletic trainer uses these materials as part of their presentation, that would meet the requirements of the regulations.

DPH is developing criteria that will allow designation of other courses or training to meet the requirements of the regulations. However, until those criteria are available you can meet the training requirements by distributing the relevant CDC educational materials, geared toward coaches, in addition to the in-person training your certified athletic trainer will provide.

- 6. If we distribute the Centers for Disease Control (CDC)'s *Heads Up Concussion* materials to parents and students, would that satisfy the annual training requirement?**

Yes, however your school must maintain records that show which parents and students were trained in this manner. All parents and students must sign and date an acknowledgement verifying that they have reviewed these materials.

- 7. What should we do if a student turns in a concussion training form, but his or her parent does not? Can we let the student play?**

The regulations require concussion training for parents and students. The policies that schools/school districts develop should address this situation, including procedures for outreach to parents who do not return completed forms required for students to participate in extracurricular sports.

PRE-PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS

- 8. Is baseline neurocognitive testing required before a student can play sports?**

No. Although baseline neurocognitive testing can be very helpful in assessing an athlete's recovery after a concussion, it is not required by the law or the regulations. However, many school districts have decided to perform these tests on their athletes.

- 9. What should we do if a student does not turn in his/her pre-participation disclosure form seeking information about his/her past head injuries as required by the law?**

You should not permit the student to participate in practice or competition until s/he submits the completed form. The head injury policies that schools/school districts develop should consider how to respond to this situation as they would to other situations when students or parents have not completed required forms or permission slips.

- 10. Our school already has a pre-season permission form that students and parents have to sign – can we add the pre-participation information required by DPH to that form so we only have to collect one?**

Yes, definitely. In fact, the regulations were written with the flexibility to allow schools/school districts to include the information found on the DPH forms in "school-based equivalents." Schools/school districts are encouraged to make use of this opportunity to streamline information collection and to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort. Schools just need to make sure that their school based forms collect all of the data elements included on the DPH forms.

11. We already have our pre-season form printed – it contains a question about whether a student has had a head injury, but doesn't have all of the elements of the DPH Pre-Participation Form – do we have to do both?

Not necessarily. You could review the forms you receive to identify those students who have a history of head injury and follow up with that subgroup of students to get the additional information. You could use the DPH Pre-Participation Form for this or a school-based equivalent that includes the same information.

12. If a student turns in a pre-participation form for fall sports, does he or she have to turn in another one before winter or spring season?

Yes. The law and the regulations require that before the start of *every sports season*, the student and the parent must complete the pre-participation form or school-based equivalent. However, the concussion awareness training only has to be completed once a year.

13. One of my players reported a history of multiple concussions on his pre-participation disclosure form – should I let him play this season?

Current evidence indicates that youth who have suffered one or more concussions are more likely to suffer a subsequent one. The decision on whether a student who has had multiple concussions should play a sport where there is a risk of another concussion is a complicated one. It should be made only after consultation with the student's physician or primary care provider; the sports medicine or concussion specialist, if involved; the neuropsychologist, if involved, and the appropriate school athletic staff and the parent. Options may include switching positions, limiting contact in practices, or changing sports altogether to minimize the risk of re-injury. The focus should be on protecting the health and safety of the student and avoiding long-term consequences that can occur from repeated concussions.

MEDICAL CLEARANCE FOR RETURN TO PLAY

14. If one of my players suffers a head injury, who can provide the medical clearance to allow him or her to return to participation in extracurricular athletics?

The regulations allow the following 4 categories of health professionals to authorize a student to return to play:

- A duly licensed physician;
- A duly licensed certified athletic trainer in consultation with a licensed physician;
- A duly licensed nurse practitioner in consultation with a licensed physician; or

- A duly licensed neuropsychologist in coordination with the physician managing the student's recovery.

If a student is seen by a physician assistant (PA), the physician supervising the PA must provide the authorization.

15. What if a doctor's clearance comes on a prescription pad or note paper?

Medical clearance for returning to play must use the DPH Medical Clearance Form available on the DPH website (www.mass.gov/dph/injury) or a school-based equivalent that includes the same information. The Medical Clearance Form contains information that is helpful to schools as they monitor the student returning from a concussion – more detailed information than a simple statement that the student is ready to return to athletics. Therefore, this form or a school-based equivalent that collects the same information should be used. You may consider providing this form to the athlete to share with the physician. DPH will work with the Massachusetts Medical Society and others to disseminate the form as well.

16. If a student has a concussion, does the student have to complete a graduated return to play program before returning to full participation in their sport?

Yes. The regulations require that students who have been removed from play due to a head injury or suspected concussion must have medical clearance to return to play. If a student is diagnosed with a concussion, this clearance can *only* be provided after he or she completes a graduated return to play program and shows no recurrence of symptoms. If a student is diagnosed with a concussion, he or she must have a written graduated reentry plan for return to full academic and athletic activity. This plan must be developed by the student's teachers, guidance counselor, school nurse, certified athletic trainer, if available or involved, parent, and the primary care provider or the physician who is managing the student's recovery.

17. What if a student is starting back at school on a modified schedule but still has some concussion symptoms – can he or she start a graduated return to play program?

No. Students who still have symptoms should not begin athletic activity. The graduated return to play program should begin only after a student is *completely* symptom free at rest. If a student is still having symptoms that prevent a full return to academic activities, he or she is not ready to begin the graduated return to play program.

18. In the past, we have had situations where a student's doctor has cleared him/her to return to sports, but the school staff noted that the student still had symptoms. In such a situation, who has the final say regarding whether a student can actually return to play?

The school has the final say. Whether a student may participate in a given extracurricular activity is a privilege that may be granted or withheld by a school based on individual circumstances. If these situations arise, the school staff should communicate to the physician or health care provider who provided the clearance that the student is not symptom-free. It is possible that the health care provider was not aware of the student's symptoms when the provider gave the clearance. If the athlete still has symptoms, the athlete should NOT return to play. A school physician, if available, should also be involved. Medical clearance is meant to be provided AFTER a student has completed his or her graduated return to play plan, so hopefully, these situations will be rare.

EXCLUSION FROM PLAY

19. What happens if there is disagreement among the coach, certified athletic trainer and the game official regarding whether a player should be removed from a game after a head injury?

Coaches and certified athletic trainers both have regulatory responsibilities for identifying players with head injuries or suspected concussions and removing them from play. In the event of a disagreement between them, or with a game official, the governing rule should be "when in doubt, sit them out".

20. I am concerned that there may be times when the coach and certified athletic trainer think that a player should be removed from a practice or game after a head injury, but the player's parent disagrees and thinks the player should continue playing – who makes the final decision?

Ideally, parents, coaches and others who have all received the DPH approved head injury training will recognize the signs and symptoms of a possible concussion. However, school staff are responsible for removing an athlete from play if he or she loses consciousness or shows the signs and symptoms of a concussion -- even if a parent or the player disagrees. As has always been the case, the focus is on the health and safety of the player.

21. What if a student suffers a head injury outside of school-sponsored extracurricular athletics – do the parent and student have to let the school know?

Yes. Schools/school districts should make sure that parents and students understand their responsibilities. Parents must inform the coach, school nurse or other school staff designated by school policy about any head injury or concussion that a student suffers while not participating in a school-sponsored extracurricular athletic activity. The parent may use the Report of Head Injury Form, or a school-based equivalent.

School staff needs this information to ensure safe participation in extracurricular athletics.

SCHOOL HEAD INJURY POLICIES

22. Our school is developing a head injury policy – do we have to have DPH review it before we can use it?

No. Schools/school districts are responsible for developing their policies in accordance with the regulations. However, DPH will be posting best practice and guidance documents to assist schools in this process.

23. The regulations say that we have to submit an affirmation that we have developed a head injury policy to the Department of Public Health by January 1, 2012 – do we also need to submit the policy itself?

No. DPH will not be routinely reviewing individual school/school district head injury policies. However, DPH will collect the affirmations, on school or school district letterhead, as documentation that the school/school district has complied with the regulatory requirement to develop appropriate head injury policy.

24. We are wondering about academic reentry – will students who need academic accommodations during their recovery all need 504 plans?

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is developing guidance to assist schools in responding to the educational needs of students who are recovering from head injuries and/or concussions. Once available, it will be posted on both the DPH and DESE websites and will be shared with school districts.

REPORTING

25. What kind of reporting are schools required to do by these new regulations?

Starting with the 2011-2012 school year, schools will need to report the following information each year:

- The total number of Report of Head Injury Forms or school-based equivalents they receive; and
- The total number of students who suffer head injuries and suspected concussions when engaged in any extracurricular athletic activities

These two statistics will provide crucial data to help us understand more about the nature and extent of head injuries in extracurricular athletic activities in Massachusetts.

26. We already have to report participation data to the MIAA – is there a way that we can add these statistics to what we already have to send to them?

DPH and MIAA continue to work together to promote the safety of student athletes while minimizing paperwork burdens on schools, coaches and athletic directors. Part of this effort includes an exploration of adding DPH required data elements to the MIAA required reports. DPH will post information about this on its website and it will also be communicated by MIAA.