

Opinion: More medical attention should be paid to women's soccer

By Traci Snedden, USA Today, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.05.19

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Megan Rapinoe (right) of the U.S. Women's soccer team is presented with a VISA Player of the Match award by Abby Wambach after the U.S. played Spain at the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup in Reims, France, June 24, 2019. Photo by: Cathrin Mueller/FIFA/FIFA via Getty Images

In a 2013 game, a ball hit U.S. soccer legend Abby Wambach in the head. It's believed the ball was going 60 miles per hour.

Wambach fell to the grass and grabbed her head. She remained on the ground for 31 seconds.

At the time, Wambach was playing in the National Women's Soccer League. This is the women's professional league in the U.S.

Wambach stood and took two off-balance steps, reported online magazine Slate. She stayed in the game. Wambach even headed the ball on the game's final play. Then she fell to her knees. Wambach was helped off the field. She likely had a concussion, or serious brain injury.

Eleven days later, the National Women's Soccer League admitted a mistake. It said Wambach's injury wasn't handled correctly, and she should have received immediate medical care.

Not Enough Research On Women's Soccer Concussion

Heading balls are still a regular part of the game. We see this in the Women's World Cup being played now.

Yet we do not see regular studies on concussions for girls' and women's soccer. Females have largely been ignored.

A concussion results from a blow, usually to the head. Some of the short-term effects of a concussion are headaches, dizziness, vomiting and disturbed sleep. Studies show concussions also have long-term effects. These include memory and attention difficulties.

The number of concussions among female soccer players is considered a major problem. Still, it goes unpublicized.

As Frequent As Or Worse Than Men's Sports

The truth is that concussions in girls' and women's soccer happen as much as or more often than in football and other men's sports. This finding is according to a number of studies on high school and college sports. Surprisingly, this trend has been known by some more than 10 years.

A Northwestern University study found female high school soccer players suffer a concussion three times more often than male players. Columbia University's Zuckerman Institute studies the brain. In a study on college sports, Zuckerman found that women's soccer was second only to football in the number of concussions.

More than 1,100 players suffer concussions a year. A recent review found just 7 percent of 221 published studies looked at concussion differences between women and men.

Additionally, the public should know concussions in females produce symptoms that are greater in number and severity. Their concussions also take longer to heal. Female athletes deserve to be included in more studies.

Of all sports, soccer is one of the most popular for females. More than 2 million young girls and women play soccer every year. This includes more than 390,000 in high school. Numbers are approaching 28,000 in college.

For girls and women, there are many benefits to team sports. They create better health, increased confidence and improved self-image. It helps build skills as a leader. Sports also help toward a greater interest in community and government.

I saw these benefits in my daughter who played soccer through college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She played alongside Rose Lavelle, who is playing for the women's team in the World Cup. Many call her the most impressive new addition to the U.S. Women's National Team.

I also saw my daughter and her teammates injured. They often suffered concussions.

Women Deserve Equal Medical Attention And Pay In Sports

Some long-awaited large-scale progress seems to be unfolding on concussions in female athletes. In one large-scale study, roughly 3,300 college athletes and military students in training were

examined. Among these people who suffered concussions, 40 percent of them are females, including my daughter. These findings will be important to girls and women who play soccer. They are also important to us parents, medical workers and scientists.

Still, more needs to happen more quickly. Three months before the World Cup, the U.S. women soccer professionals began fighting for pay that's equal to male players. They deserve equal attention to brain health. It should focus on preventing and recognizing concussions, as well as improving medical care. We must reduce the harm of concussions on female soccer players.

The U.S. Women's team will play in the 2019 World Cup Final in France on July 7.

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