INJURY PREVENTION: Are all your young athletes wearing properly fitted mouth guards?

Young athletes in all sports suffer needless injuries to their teeth and mouth — often because they either aren’t wearing a mouth guard or are using one that doesn’t fit properly or isn’t in good condition.

According to the National Youth Sports Safety Foundation, 15 million dental injuries and five million cases of traumatically lost teeth occur every year.

Dr. Bruce Burton, spokesperson for the Academy of General Dentistry, spoke with SportingKid to help coaches and parents get a better understanding of how important mouth guards are for helping to protect young athletes.

**SK:** What’s the best type of mouth guard for a child to wear?

**DR. BURTON:** The best choice is a mouth guard custom-made by your dentist. It offers the best protection, fit and comfort level because it is made from a cast to fit your teeth.

**SK:** Many kids gag while trying to wear a mouth guard. Is there anything coaches or parents can do to help them adjust to that uncomfortable feeling of having something in their mouth while they are competing?

**DR. BURTON:** The fit of the mouth guard is very important. You do not want it to over extend into the back of the mouth where the gag reflex is the strongest. I encourage making a game of wearing a mouth guard in short periods, until the child becomes accustomed to it. Wearing a mouth guard needs to become a habit, just like wearing a helmet when riding a bike. It’s great when parents model wearing a mouth guard while competing in sports, too.

**SK:** Since many children begin playing organized sports as young as 3, at what age should a child start to wear a mouth guard?

**DR. BURTON:** We recommend that our patients start wearing mouth guards once their permanent teeth start coming into the mouth. This typically occurs between 6 and 7 years of age.

**SK:** How much less likely are children to suffer an injury if they are wearing a mouth guard?

**DR. BURTON:** In some 200,000 cases annually, mouth guards have been known to avert oral injuries and cut the risk of concussion by 50 percent. A mouth guard can prevent serious injuries such as broken teeth, jaw fractures, cerebral hemorrhage and neck injuries by helping to avoid situations where the lower jaw gets jammed into the upper jaw. They may also reduce the severity and incidence of concussions.

**SK:** How do you recommend keeping the mouth guard clean?

**DR. BURTON:** Although a mouth guard is recommended to prevent permanent damage...
to the mouth and teeth, we know it also has the potential to be a reservoir for bacteria that can cause gum infections or the bacteria that help promote tooth decay. As a high school football coach for 25 years, I witnessed many poor habits that athletes practiced when handling their mouth guard. Chewing on the mouth guard until it no longer serves the purpose of protecting the teeth is one poor habit. In addition, some athletes throw the mouth guard in with dirty, sweaty gear and never clean it. For mouth guard maintenance:

- Clean your mouth guard by washing it with soap and cool (not hot) water.
- Before storing, soak your mouth guard in mouthwash.
- Keep your mouth guard in a well-ventilated, plastic storage box when not in use. Make sure the box has several holes so the mouth guard will dry.
- Heat is bad for a mouth guard, so don’t leave it in direct sunlight or in a closed automobile.
- Don’t bend your mouth guard when storing.
- Don’t handle or wear someone else’s mouth guard.
- Call your dentist if there are any problems.

### Tips from the NYSCA Coach of the Year

Donald Wendland, the reigning National Youth Sports Coaches Association Coach of the Year from Robins Air Force Base Youth Sports in Georgia, offers up the following coaching tips to help make your season a fun-filled and rewarding one:

- The success of the season depends on the kids: The better the effort they apply the better the results will be. I tell them in the beginning that the coaches will teach them the skills needed to succeed in the game but it is up to them to apply them.
- Talk to your players throughout the season about what they like and dislike about the game they are playing. For the older kids I have even asked them about school and movies. Take an interest. I have had kids come up to me and say that they made the school team. So we talk about how they are doing and how the team is doing.
- Talking to the kids, and not at them, is very important. For my Under 6 soccer team whenever we get into a team huddle I get on both knees so I am at eye level with them. This is something the kids pick up on real fast. Have fun with them. If they see you having fun they will enjoy it a lot more and time will pass quickly for them.
- I always ask at the end if everyone had fun. If someone says no then I ask why and try and spin it into a positive by telling them we will work on that in the next practice — and then remember to do that in the next practice!