



Basketball Players: Be on

GO V UARD

when it comes to protecting your smile

Photo: AP/Wide World Photos

More than 40 million children today participate in organized sports in the United States. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, sports-related craniofacial injuries account for 600,000 emergency room visits each year. This adds up to millions of knocked-out, cracked, or chipped teeth, lip lacerations, and even jaw fractures. No one argues that safety is a critical factor when a child is participating in a contact sport. When playing football, hockey, and lacrosse, student-athletes wear helmets to protect against concussions. They wear pads on their shoulders and around their knees and elbows to safeguard against breaks and bruises. And they wear mouthguards to protect their teeth, jaws, and skull from injuries related to blows to the face or head.

Maybe it's because the players don't swing a stick around or wear helmets, but basketball is all too often overlooked as being a contact sport. Yet anyone who's ever been on the receiving end of a wayward elbow under the net, had a ball clip them on the chin mid-pass, or fallen face-first onto the court scrambling for a rebound would attest otherwise. Basketball *is* a contact sport, and the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) wants athletes who play basketball to do everything they can to protect themselves from orofacial injuries.

Orofacial injuries are very problematic because they generally involve the nerves of young, permanent teeth and can require a lifetime of follow-up care and expense for athletes and their parents. In fact, costs can be as high as \$10,000 to \$15,000 per injured tooth, not to mention numerous hours in the dentist's chair.

Mouthguards help prevent injury to the mouth area, especially the teeth, lips, cheeks, and tongue. Even athletes who use helmets or face masks should wear mouthguards, since they also protect against head and neck injuries by helping to cushion blows. In fact, athletes who do not wear mouthguards during games and practices are 60 times more likely to suffer an orofacial injury, according to the MDS.

Until recently, in Massachusetts mouthguards were required in basketball, along with football, field hockey, ice hockey, lacrosse, soccer, and wrestling. However, in May 2007, the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association (MIAA), the governing body that

oversees high school mouthguard regulations, voted to rescind its mouthguard mandate in basketball. Now mouthguards are only "recommended" in basketball instead of "required." The MDS is concerned that because mouthguards are now only "recommended" in basketball, the majority of players will not wear them, and the number of orofacial injuries to student-athletes will almost certainly increase.

In basketball alone, a player's risk of orofacial injury is 15 times that of a football player, according to the Academy of General Dentistry. Boston Celtics forward and team captain Paul Pierce has some personal experience with orofacial injuries: two of his own teeth were broken during a 2002 game against the Phoenix Suns, and during a November 2008 game, Pierce was involved in a loose ball scramble that resulted in Indiana Pacers forward Danny Granger losing two teeth (see photo above). In these two instances, neither player was wearing a mouthguard, which meant that both had to spend time off the basketball court and in the dental chair to repair the damage.

There are three types of mouthguards available: custom-made, boil-and-bite, and stock. Dentists strongly recommend that athletes wear custom-made mouthguards, because in terms of fit, comfort, and protection, they are by far the best as they are made from dental impressions of the teeth. By pressure-laminating the mouthguard during its fabrication, the final product is designed to fit an athlete's mouth exactly. As a result, the athlete breathes better, speaks more clearly, and most importantly, receives the best protection from an orofacial injury.

The MDS recognizes that custom-made mouthguards are more costly than store-bought mouthguards. To that end, since 2002 the Massachusetts Dental Society's *Grin and Wear It*® mouthguard program has been providing custom-made mouthguards to students for a discounted or nominal fee. More than 170 dentists throughout the state currently volunteer for this initiative.

So, for all the point guards, power forwards, and centers out there, before you race downcourt to make that game-winning layup, please make sure you don't get laid out with an orofacial injury. Wear a mouthguard. 

For more information on mouthguards or the *Grin and Wear It*® Program, contact the Massachusetts Dental Society at (800) 842-3747 or visit www.massdental.org.