

With School Sports Seasons in Flux, Mouth Safety Remains a Concern for Young Athletes

High school sports in Massachusetts have looked a lot different this school year as we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, and while student-athletes have been forced to make a multitude of adjustments, the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) reminds parents, coaches, and athletic directors to make sure that their athletes put in a mouthguard before they put on that face mask.

Many fall sports continued this year with strict guidelines enacted to prevent the virus from spreading, while some sports—football, cheerleading, indoor track, and unified basketball—were postponed until the “Fall II” season, which kicks off in February 2021, per guidelines issued by the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association. Schools also had the option to skip the season for specific sports, with some programs opting to skip winter sports—which are played indoors and thereby carry a higher risk of infection—entirely. This has led to much uncertainty and inconsistency when it comes to youth and school sports during the pandemic. Will teams get to play? If so, can there be close or direct contact? If inter-team play is not allowed, can the student-athletes still practice or work out as a team?

Despite all the delays and confusion, one certainty remains: Athlete health and safety is at the forefront of all decisions regarding school sports this school year. An athlete is 60 times more likely to suffer harm to the teeth when not wearing a mouthguard, according to the National Youth Sports Safety Foundation. Yet the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Office of Oral Health has reported that about half of Massachusetts middle school students do not wear a mouthguard when playing team sports.

“We’re all aware of the risks of not wearing a [face] mask in public these days, but it is still commonplace to see young athletes putting their mouths, teeth, gums, and lips at risk for serious injury,” says MDS President Dr. MaryJane Hanlon. “This includes athletes participating in sports not typically thought of as ‘full contact’—such as cheerleading, cross-country, and volleyball—because any fall can result in damage to the mouth area.”

Sports injuries involving the mouth can have far-reaching consequences. In addition to any pain and expense in the immediate treatment of a knocked-out tooth or other mouth injury, patients may encounter significant expense with follow-up care—many times greater than the price of a mouthguard—as well as missed school days.

There are three types of mouthguards available: custom-made mouthguard, boil-and-bite mouthguard, and stock mouthguard that one can buy in a sporting goods store. Dentists usually recommend that athletes wear custom-made mouthguards, which are made in two layers: one colored and one clear. During the fabrication process, an athlete’s name can be etched into the mouthguard to ensure identification and eliminate the possibility of cross-contamination.

To learn more about the types of mouthguards available, guidelines for orthodontic patients, and tips for handling mouthguards, please visit massdental.org/mouthguards and download the educational *Grin and Wear It®* poster and brochure. You can also ask your dentist for more information.

