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UNH Prof Pens Guidelines For Spinal Injuries On Playing Field

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DURHAM, N.H. - Sports participation constitutes the second most common cause of spinal cord injuries for Americans age 30 and younger.

That's why a new position statement from the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) provides guidelines for immediate treatment and transport of athletes who are injured on the playing field. Erik Swartz, associate professor of kinesiology at the University of New Hampshire, is lead author of the statement, which was published in this month's "Journal of Athletic Training."

"Serious spinal injuries can be devastating, due to the high incidence of long-term neurological impairment and premature death," says Swartz, who teaches in the athletic training option of kinesiology. "That's why we urge players and parents, as well as coaches and medical personnel, to become better versed in how to prevent these types of injuries and how to care for injured athletes and safely prepare them for transport to a hospital."

The statement, "National Athletic Trainers' Association Position Statement: Acute Management of the Cervical Spine-Injured Athlete," outlines guidelines that athletic trainers and other health care professionals, coaches, athletes, and people on the sidelines should follow to avoid injury or exacerbate spinal injuries that have already occurred, including:

- Understand how cervical spine injuries occur and be fully aware of the importance of avoiding contact with the head in any sport, and emphasize proper techniques of tackling or checking in football, ice hockey and lacrosse.

- Keep current on all pertinent safety rules enacted for the prevention of cervical spine injuries.

- Properly maintain all sporting equipment, and wear and use equipment as intended by the manufacturer.

- Ensure that equipment fits properly; correctly fitted helmets and other equipment often help with spine stabilization in the event of an injury.

- Ensure the availability of knowledgeable health care providers, such as athletic trainers, on the sidelines.

- Ensure that nonmedical professionals refrain from touching or moving an athlete who might have a spinal injury. Nonmedical professionals should never remove any helmets,
pads or other equipment from an injured athlete; the team's athletic trainer and/or other on-site medical staff will assess the injured athlete and determine whether he or she requires an ambulance.

While football is associated with the greatest number of catastrophic spinal injuries for all U.S. sports, skiing, rugby, gymnastics, swimming and diving, track and field (e.g., pole vaulting), cheerleading and baseball also involve activities that place participants at risk for spine injuries. "Sports participation is a leading cause of these types of injuries, especially in younger people," Swartz says. "An average of eight catastrophic cervical spine injuries occurred annually in football alone between 1997 and 2006."

"The athletic trainer is very often the first responder when an athlete goes down on the field," Swartz says. "NATA's review of precautions and practices for immediate care helps ensure athletic trainers and other health care professionals understand the most effective methods to care for athletes with cervical spine injuries."

To read NATA's position statement in its entirety, visit: http://www.nata.org/statements/position/AcuteMgtCervicalSpineInjuredAth.pdf or go to www.nata.org. To learn more about the athletic training option in the kinesiology major at UNH, go to www.chhs.unh.edu/kin_at/.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 11,800 undergraduate and 2,400 graduate students.

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**Photograph available to download:** http://www.unh.edu/news/img/swartz.jpg

Caption: Erik Swartz, associate professor of kinesiology at the University of New Hampshire, authored a position statement for National Athletic Trainers' Association on guidelines for treating and transporting athletes who are injured on the playing field.

Credit: Earl Studios Photography.