

Argus Orthopaedic Zone

Burners and Stingers

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

It is hard these days to listen to sports radio or read a sports page without the term concussion being mentioned. It is on everyone's mind who is in anyway involved in sports. Today I want to move down to an equally critical area of the body – the neck.

What It Is

A common neck injury in sports, especially football is called a “burner or stinger”. Do you really know what it is? I didn't think so.

It is a sharp sensation somewhat like hitting your funny bone. An athlete takes a hit that affects the neck and causes a tingling pain and numbness (medically called paresthesia) down the arm. It sometimes goes all the way to the hand.

What Happens

The injury occurs when the head is forcefully pushed sideways and down bending the neck. This causes a sudden compression of the nerves coming out of the neck which form the brachial plexus. Compressed or pinched, it is all the same.

Stretching

Another thing that can occur to injure the neck nerves is stretching them when the athlete falls causing the shoulder to be pulled in a direction opposite the head.

Symptoms

The athlete feels a shock like tingling pain starting at the base of the neck and shoulder and proceeds down the arm even to the hand. Even though the injury is in the neck the pain “travels” where the nerves pass from the neck to the hand. These nerves control the entire use of the arm. At times paralysis, complete or partial, weakness or loss of sensation can occur.

Evaluation

I get a good idea on the sideline if a stinger has occurred by asking what the athlete felt. Then muscle and neurological testing of the affected arm must be done. After the game I will arrange x-rays of the shoulder and the neck.

Treatment

Obviously I keep the player out of the game on the sideline. If symptoms disappear rapidly and there are no findings, I may let the player return. If there are any residual findings of weakness or decreased sensation, the player is out of their sport until further evaluation can take place.

If there are no positive x-ray findings, etc.

- Rest the arm
- Maybe a sling and/or soft cervical collar
- Ice
- Ibuprofen anti-inflammatory medication

- Recheck in a few days
- If significant improvement, start simple neck and shoulder strengthening exercises.

What Else

If symptoms persist the player stays out of action until I can get further testing such as an electrodiagnostic study (EMG-NCT) and possibly MRI.

While specific shoulder injuries don't usually cause the same symptoms as a stinger I have to consider this in my evaluation and management too.

Next time you see a player being helped off the field holding their arm you will know what may have happened and what we do to evaluate them.

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