

# USING YOUR HEAD

**WE KNOW THAT FROM THE MOMENT** a young athlete takes his or her first hockey strides on the ice, well-fitting quality protective equipment is Job One. For that reason, parents are keen on purchasing the latest, and sometimes most expensive, equipment out there. For young players, learning about the equipment — how to put it on, wear it, use it and care for it — is a time-consuming but critical task that leads to success on the ice.

Making sure that you have the best equipment available is critical to preventing and reducing injuries: sturdy skates that support ankles and insteps; pads that fit properly to protect the chest, shoulders, elbows, knees and shins; a form-fitted mouth guard that protects teeth and jaw; and of course a well-fitted, up-to-date helmet.

## USE YOUR HEAD WHEN CHOOSING A HELMET

Let's talk helmets. For amateur athletes, USA Hockey Rules 304(b) and (d) require that helmets and facemasks be certified by HECC, the Hockey Equipment Certification Council.

For certification, helmets are drop tested, with chin straps tested for strength and elongation, and face protectors tested for their ability to take puck and blade hits. Helmet certification lasts for six and a half years, so check the helmet certification sticker on your helmet to tell whether it is time to replace it. (*See sidebar.*)

For goalie helmets, there is no required time standard, so use your best judgment and err on the safe side with replacement. A helmet age check is extremely important for young players where cost is an issue because players grow quickly and may opt to purchase a used helmet.

Importantly, remember that helmet certification is based on the design of the helmet as produced by the manufacturer. If you change the inside pads and structure, you are then altering the ability of the helmet to protect you, and the helmet will no longer meet the certification standards.

When choosing a helmet, it should fit comfortably and snugly. It is not meant to slip easily on and off. It is meant to stay on your head and endure the rigor of physical activity on the ice.

Still, while helmets may reduce the incidence of skull fractures or more serious head injuries, they cannot prevent a concussion.



**YOUR BEST PIECE OF EQUIPMENT IS ONE THAT MONEY CAN'T BUY**

## WHAT THE HECC IS A HECC STICKER?



On the back of every helmet is a sticker that contains the HECC label. HECC stands for the Hockey Equipment Certification Council, which validates that each helmet has been tested and meets the requirements of the most appropriate performance standards.

USA Hockey mandates the use of HECC certified equipment. Each HECC sticker includes an expiration date for HECC certification. HECC certification for helmets is good for six and a half years. After that, it's time to purchase a new helmet. Of course, if the helmet is damaged or worn out, you should replace it immediately regardless of the HECC sticker date.

The HECC sticker is good from the date the helmet was produced, not the date of purchase, so make sure you get your money's worth by purchasing a helmet that hasn't been sitting on the shelf for too long.



# THE RIGHT BITE

DON'T CHEW ON YOUR MOUTH GUARD.

Wear it. A mouth guard won't protect a player's teeth or prevent a laceration if it's hanging out of the side of your mouth or dangling from a strap.

Improperly wearing a mouth guard can also cost you time in the penalty box. First comes a warning and then you sit for 10 minutes for violating Rule 304 c.



In North America, youth hockey players are also required to wear full face masks. Cages offer the best overall protection, although many complain that some areas of vision are blocked. On the other hand, older athletes may choose plastic visors, which provide good airflow but less facial protection, and tend to get scratched easily. Some athletes use a combination of a visor and cage. Whatever you use, take care of it. Keep cages secure and regularly replace scratched visors.

## LET YOUR HEAD GUIDE YOUR PLAY

The equipment you wear is designed to help protect you from injury: bruises, slashes, fractures or concussions. But sometimes, equipment can give you a false sense of security, or what I call the "Gladiator Syndrome."

It is not uncommon for athletes to feel a sense of empowerment, invulnerability and strength after suiting up. After all, players do look physically bigger, taller and stronger. This feeling of invincibility often occurs without us realizing it, prompting us to take more risks and be more aggressive without thinking about it.

Alex, the captain of an adult hockey team in New Jersey, discovered this insight.

"I normally play with a half-shield visor. But, I was going to sub for a less skilled team at a lower level of play. So, to be extra careful, I wore my full cage that night. On one play, I went straight for another player, and without really thinking about it, we hit hard face to face. After the game, I realized that I would never do that if I wore my visor."

The moral of the story: Use your head when it comes to playing the game the safe and smart way.

## YOUR BEST PROTECTION IS FREE

So, when it comes to protective equipment, use your head. It is the best piece of equipment you have, and it's free. Use it wisely when it comes to choosing your equipment, caring for your equipment and playing the game the right way.

After all, your head is the best protection that money can't buy. ✨

*Rosemarie Scolaro Moser is the author of "Ahead of the Game: The Parent's Guide to Youth Sports Concussion," director of the Sports Concussion Center of New Jersey.*

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