

Hits to head main topic at GM's meetings

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(AP) -- Hits to the head that can cause concussions were the main topic as NHL general managers began their annual meetings Monday.

A discussion of a two-year independent medical study undertaken by the league included a video presentation showing footage of a number of well-known hits to the [head](#) during games. The league estimates there are 60,000 to 70,000 body hits during a season, and during the past 2 1/2 years there have been 200 concussions reported among players.

In 21 games reviewed from this season, showing an average of 22 contacts to the head per game, 30 percent of those hits were shoulder to head. Most body checks with the shoulder are considered legal hits.

"We're looking at can we reduce concussions that come from legal hits?" said Colin Campbell, the NHL's director of hockey operations. "Our challenge today, tomorrow and Wednesday at this meeting is to see if we can arrive at some sort of conclusion that will make the game safer to play and reduce concussions.

"What we don't want to do is damage one of the basic fibers of the game."

The NHL is struggling to minimize concussions without damaging a sport that clearly relies on its physicality to enhance spectator entertainment.

"The hits are great until someone gets hurt," Campbell said. "The question is, do we want to take shoulders to the head out of the game of hockey?"

Dr. Winne Meeuwisse, the NHL consulting physician, said the study did not pinpoint a general trend in the type of hits that result in concussions. Meeuwisse also pointed out not every [concussion](#) results from a direct hit to the head, but could happen from a whiplash effect from a hit to another part of the body.

"They happen at all different places and in all different ways," he said. "They're open ice. They're along the boards and glass, which is different than being against the boards and glass, which also happens.

"They happen in the offensive and defensive zone, the neutral zone, and they happen in all different mechanisms of contact."

The issue of hits to the heads was illuminated at the meeting by the concussion suffered by Boston Bruins center Marc Savard when Pittsburgh Penguins forward Matt Cooke blindsided him with a shoulder hit Sunday.

Peter Chiarelli, the general manager of the Bruins, said Savard was cleared to fly home to Boston on Monday. Savard told him he was "very tired and wanted to go to bed."

"I guess the timing on this thing is good from the perspective that we can discuss it," said Chiarelli, who added the Savard incident was not specifically discussed at the meeting.

"What I saw, what I thought was, he was in a position of vulnerability, which is not a criteria right now for supplemental discipline. These are things we talked about all this morning. We're genuine about this (concern) and it's the balance between physicality and the hits to the head."

Players have become bigger and equipment better, which has made the game faster. One outgrowth of that fact is the possibility of more injuries.

"It's clear that a lot of these concussions are from unsuspected blows on lateral players," said Brian Burke, general manager of the Toronto Maple Leafs. "That's the particular thing we have to look at. But, again, it's a tightrope; there can't be this wave of sentiment that we have to take hitting out of this game."

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