

Seeking to reduce head contact, NFL mandates use of Guardian Cap helmet for early portion of training camp

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PALM BEACH, Fla. -- The NFL has mandated the use of Guardian Cap helmet covers for certain positions during a key portion of training camp when concussions and head contact typically elevate, league officials said Tuesday.

The resolution, approved during a morning session at the annual NFL meetings, will require offensive and defensive linemen, tight ends and linebackers to wear Guardian Caps for every preseason practice between the start of the training camp contact period and the second preseason game.

The caps are soft-shell pads that attach to the outside of the helmet and are used with some frequency in college football. NFL teams have experimented with them sporadically in recent years. According to the manufacturer, the current version reduces force from head contact by up to 20% if all players involved in the contact are using it. Guardian Cap developed the technology in part through an NFL grant awarded in 2017.

The mandate represents the first significant step in the league's effort to eliminate all avoidable head contact, a goal that chief medical officer Dr. Allen Sills announced earlier this year.

"Even if there are no change to the concussion numbers with this intervention," Sills said, "we would still consider this worthwhile if it reduces the force that each player receives."

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The NFL has brought down its concussion numbers since Sills issued a call to action in 2018. There were 187 reported concussions in 2021 between the start of training camp and the end of the regular season, down from an average of 266.3 between 2015 and 2017. Sills said in February that the league had begun work to drive down the effects of all head contact, whether or not it leads to a concussion.

"We know that some head contact inevitably occurs in sports of all types," he said, "but we want to focus on the part that we think is avoidable."

The first two weeks of training camp produce a high frequency of concussions -- approximately 30 per year -- and a greater degree of overall head contact, according to NFL executive vice president of health and safety Jeff Miller. Part of the elevated rate can be attributed to the higher number of players involved in early training camp periods, many of whom are unlikely to earn a final roster spot. But that early period also features heavy full-pads practices with elevated use of physical drills such as 9-on-7 as teams get acclimated to contact in full pads.

The rate of head contact lowers after the second preseason game as most teams shift to a lighter practice load. Players will be encouraged but not required to wear the Guardian Cap thereafter.

Meanwhile, Miller said, the NFL also will require that every player use wearable technology during preseason practices and walk-throughs. The resulting data will give league and union engineers a better idea of exertion during that time and provide a more accurate aggregation of leaguewide trends.

Most teams use wearable technology of some type and degree -- most typically via Zebra Technologies and Catapult -- but the resolution will standardize the practice. Teams will also be asked to submit video of two full training camp practices to confirm whether submitted practice plans match up with actual practice activity.

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