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NEWS

Doctor at WVU Rockefeller Neurosciences Institute speaks on Guardian Caps in youth football

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — The topic of Guardian Caps continues to be a main talking point in West Virginia after eighth grader Cohen Craddock, a football player at Madison Middle School, died from a head injury he suffered at practice.



Cohen Craddock

Guardian Caps, an extra layer of protection put onto football helmets, have become more and more prevalent in the game over the past few years, as the NFL recently announced they would allow players to wear them in regular season games.

Dr. Javier Cardenas, the director of Concussion & Brain Injury Center at WVU Rockefeller Neurosciences Institute, says the use of Guardian Caps in the highest level of football shows that the extra protection has merit.

"You are seeing it (Guardian Caps) at the highest level of sport being used, which should suggest that there is now a standard for its use," Cardenas said on MetroNews "Talkline" with Hoppy Kercheval Monday.

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Dr. Javier Cardenas (Photo from WVU)

Cardenas, who also serves as the vice chair of the Head, Neck, and Spine Committee in the NFL, says Guardian Caps weren't originally built to reduce concussions specifically, but the numbers show they are.

"It was not intended to reduce concussions, but indeed, over several seasons, specifically practice/pre-season, we (NFL) found a 50% reduce that was sustained," Cardenas said. "Not expected but definitely welcomed." Cardenas explained the science behind taking a hit to the head in football, and he says some hits can change brain function.

"What happens when there is contact between two heads or head to the ground or head to the knee, you can get a movement of the brain within the skull that causes a change in brain function," said. "Not every hit to the head is a concussion, but when there is a change in brain function causing even a slight gap in memory, vision change, balance change, headaches, dizziness, etc., that's what's happening in the brain."

The NFL mandated the use of Guardian Caps for its players in 2022 for pre-season practices, with the exception of quarterbacks and kickers. In addition, nearly 90% of power conference teams in college football use the caps as well. Cardenas says Guardian Caps are proven to be effective when both athletes involved in a collision wear them.

"If we have two athletes that are wearing it (Guardian Caps), then the positive effect is cumulative, which is why originally, it was just offensive line and then it was offensive line and defensive line, and now you see mandates for just about every position except for quarterbacks and specialists like kickers," Cardenas said.

Cardenas also says Guardian Caps do not cause a decrease in performance like some suspect, but rather, data shows the opposite.

"The engineers for the NFL looked at all of these things and found that for every single helmet they tried it (a Guardian Cap) on, it improved performance," Cardenas said.

"That's really key because had it not improved performance, or had it caused a decrease in performance of any helmet, you wouldn't see them on any athlete."



Sen. Mike Stuart

State Senator Mike Stuart, R-Kanawha also recently made his thoughts on the matter public, as he is calling for the state to mandate Guardian Caps for school and youth players, as well as fund the purchasing of each cap. The bill Stuart will present will be named after Craddock.

While Cardenas certainly supports the extra protection for youth football players in West Virginia, he says there are other factors in head injuries that need to be considered.

"We can't just look at equipment," Cardenas said. "We need to really look at some of the other strategies that have overall reduced concussions even in the NFL, including, things like lowering the helmet, including things like practices and limited the numbers of contact practices in the regular season. Having an athletic trainer is critically important to every professional sport, but these are also lessons that we need for our youth."