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FOR MANY EAST VALLEY STUDENTS, being back at school means back on the field, rink or court. Sports are an integral part of growing up for most teens, and a great source of physical activity.

There are growing concerns in Arizona, however, over some of the potential dangers these young athletes face. Much attention has been given to the potential severity of concussion-related complications over the past several years, resulting in significant changes to the rulebooks of many athletic organizations.

Whether it's a tackle gone wrong or an accidental head-to-head, the brain injuries can be dangerous. Often, people underestimate how serious a concussion can be. The truth is, concussions can range from a mild, traumatic injury to sometimes life threatening or death. If not treated properly, young athletes can also run the risk of life-long symptoms resulting from the injury.

Thankfully, new tools and resources are aiding in the detection and treatment of concussions for our student athletes. A new law in

Arizona, SB 1521 (enacted April 2011), helps protect kids in school sports when a potential concussion occurs. The law requires students to be pulled from play until released with a clean bill of


health from a doctor. Additionally, it mandates that a student cannot return to play soon after a head injury.

Before an athlete is released for play, his/her doctor must determine the severity of the injury by running some neurological exams. In mild cases of concussions, athletes are closely monitored and will be advised to take some time to allow the brain to heal. In more severe cases where symptoms like loss of consciousness or amnesia occur, or if headaches or confusion worsen, the doctor might request a CT (computed tomography) scan to view the brain. The sooner this is done in more serious cases, the better. Also, it's important to ensure the imaging results are read by a fellowship-trained radiologist that specializes in neuro-imaging.

Although there are no tests that can diagnose a concussion, medical imaging can evaluate for the possibility of a more severe brain injury, like bleeding in the head or swelling.

What's most important is that the athlete's doctor gain a firm understanding of the injury severity and give the athlete time to heal. Repetitive head injuries from returning to play too soon can result in chronic symptoms such as headaches, difficulty concentrating, personality changes, sleep disorders and even depression.

While some people disagree with the new law, it allows for enhanced safety of our youth, and improved education of students, coaches and administrators regarding the importance of treating concussions appropriately.

Scottsdale Medical Imaging offers neuro-imaging services and fellowship-trained neuro radiologists at its new Gilbert center located at 3645 S. Rome St., Suite 101. For more information, visit esmil.com or call (480) 425-5000. 

By the Numbers

3.5 million youth ages 14 and under get hurt annually playing sports or participating in recreational activities.

Although death from a sports injury is rare, the leading cause of death from a sports-related injury is a brain injury.

Sports and recreational activities contribute to **21%** of all traumatic brain injuries among American children.

More than **775,000** children participating in sports activities are injured each year, and one in four injuries is considered serious.

62% of sports-related injuries occur during practice.

Sources: National SAFE KIDS Campaign and the American Academy of Pediatrics