

Brachial Plexus Injuries **Shoulder “Stingers”** Need Prompt Attention

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The words “burner” and “stinger” are familiar ones on football sidelines, but this injury can happen to other athletes including wrestlers and swimmers. A burner is an injury that occurs to the brachial plexus. The brachial plexus is a complex network of nerves that run from your neck down to your upper extremity (arm). This network provides sensation to and controls the movement of your shoulders, arms, and hands.

The injury usually occurs when the head and shoulder are forced in opposite directions resulting in traction or stretching of the brachial plexus. This stretching can injure the nerves, ranging from a mild “strain” to complete tearing of the nerves. Fortunately, most stretching injuries to the brachial plexus from sport are minor resulting in only transient (short duration) “burning or stinging” pain (and thus, the name) which runs along the course of the nerves down the arm and into the fingers. Muscle weakness, decreased arm function, loss of sensation, and other pain in the shoulder, arm, and hand can be experienced. The signs and symptoms will vary in severity and dura-



tion according to the amount of the stretch injury. Milder injuries can last minutes to hours. More severe injuries may result in permanent loss of sensation and paralysis. All brachial plexus injuries should be immediately examined by the certified athletic trainer or team physician.

The athlete should not return to competition until he/she can demonstrate full recovery of nerve function, including sensation, strength, and reflexes. Return to play before full recovery can result in repetitive injury to the nerves and possibly permanent nerve damage, including chronic pain, loss of sensation, and weakness or paralysis of muscles. If an athlete is cleared to play, he/she should be retested frequently and report any reoccurring signs and symptoms immediately.

Athletes can limit their risk for brachial plexus injuries. Strength and range of motion exercise programs that focus on the neck, trapezius, and shoulder stabilizing muscles can prevent injury to the plexus. For football, special shoulder under-paddings (cowboy collars) and neck rolls provide additional protection when combined with proper tackling techniques.

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