

Study Shows Ivy League Kickoff Rules Experiment Dramatically Reduced Concussions

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A simple change in Ivy League football kickoff rules has resulted in dramatically reduced concussion rates, a study published Monday in the Journal of the American Medical Association found.

With approval from the NCAA, the Ivy League introduced two key rule changes to its college kickoffs beginning in 2016. Kickoffs were moved up from the 35-yard line to the 40 and touchbacks from the 20-yard line to the 25. The aim of the 5-yard move was to have more kickoffs land in the end zone to incentivize returners to stay behind their goal line for a touchback and reduce returns—and the collisions that occur during them.

Kickoffs are one of the most dangerous times during a football game statistically, accounting for 23.4% of head injuries, researchers found, even though they only make up 5.8% of overall plays.

The study found that since the introduction of these rule changes just two seasons ago, the number of concussions on kickoffs fell 68%, from 10 concussions per 1,000 kicks to two per 1,000 kicks in Ivy League play. At the same time, kickoffs resulting in touchbacks increased from 18% to almost 50%.

The experimental changes were tested as part of the Ivy League's overall concussion review, which began in 2010. The findings come amid a broader push for adjustments to kickoff rules at all levels of football to ensure safer play on the field. The results indicate that reducing returns and increasing touchbacks can help reduce the risk of head injury, which is a positive sign for a sport struggling to balance tradition with increasing safety concerns.



NFL

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“We see really compelling evidence that, indeed, introducing the experimental kickoff rule seems to be associated with a large reduction in concussions,” said Douglas Wiebe, the lead author of the study and the director of the Penn Injury Science Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

He added: “A simple yet strategic policy change helps sustain the quality of the game while making the game safer for student athletes.”

The Ivy League’s changes have inspired the NCAA to alter its kickoff procedures. The NCAA implemented a new rule this season throughout all of college football that allows players to call for a fair catch on kickoffs that fall inside the 25-yard line. The fair catch means the kick cannot be advanced and a ball carrier is not tackled, resulting in the equivalent of a touchback where the ball is placed at the 25. The Ivy League uses the fair catch rule, along with kicking off from the 40.