

Hints and Tips for Cochlear Implants and Sports and Leisure

Sports help to get people moving and health depends on being active. Physical activity can reduce stress, reduce frustration and boost self-confidence. Team sports can really boost a person's self-esteem and teach respect for others. Sport also gives opportunities to find ways to solve problems and be successful - skills that can be transferred to other areas of life.

As well as physical development improving through sport, language and listening skills will, too. People who play sports will have specific listening needs that may be different from their daily listening e.g. football players must listen for a whistle in background noise to know when there is a stoppage. Typically players won't be unable to lip read when their coach or other players call from a distance during, so they have to rely only on their listening.

Generally having a cochlear implant won't affect the ability to play sports. Any sport is good, as long as the implant is not directly hit .e.g. by a ball or clash of heads. A direct blow to the implant can damage it. Follow safety rules and keep a constant check on the equipment - then sports can be good for health and great fun.

Newly implanted users

In the first 6-8 weeks after the operation the area around the implant will still be healing and extra care is needed to make sure that the child has no bangs to the head. In the early weeks children should not take part in any activity where there is any risk of this.

Playing sports with a cochlear implant

Whatever your sport of choice, you should always:

- Protect your implant system – have a signal that other people know in case the device is knocked off
- Protect your head from impact
- Stop moisture damage by protecting the sound processor from sweat during use and by using a drying box every day or think about using Active wear
- If wearing a baseball cap in a sudden shower, turn the bill to cover a/the processor
- Follow all instructions and warnings
- Decide what coaches and other players need to know
- Use of FM may be allowed – consult local bylaws

Non-Contact Sports

Many non-contact sports can be played without any special changes. For sports like golf, just put on your processor and go. For more active non-contact sports like soccer or running, a processor can be worn with a hat, baseball cap or sports headband. There are some headbands have been specially designed to use with one or two processors, to hold the processors safely in place. Some users may decide to take off their processor to stop it from falling off. This may mean that extra support is needed in PE lessons.

Wear a helmet or other head protection (e.g. a scrum cap) when playing sports that require them, such as baseball, cricket, biking or rollerblading. Studies show that wearing a helmet can reduce head injuries sustained while skiing by 60%. Helmets with mesh ear flaps help to secure the hearing device and may make hearing through a helmet easier. If there is a big risk of blows to the head the external parts of the implant should be removed.

A good helmet provides comfort and protection. It will fit well so that it doesn't put pressure on the implant. Trying on a number of different helmets can help. Modifying a helmet to fit the audio processor inside (like removing straps or padding) is a bad idea. Once you pick your helmet, make sure that all of the adjustments, like tightness and position on the head, are set correctly.

Each sport has different helmet requirements, due to the type and force (and frequency) of likely impacts. American football helmets get banged quite often so they are quite heavy duty. Bicycle helmets work by compressing the foam inside. If you ever hit your head while wearing a bicycle helmet, cut the chin straps (so nobody can wear it) and throw it away.

Top 10 * sports and recreational activities with the highest number of head injuries among children 14 and younger:

- 1) Cycling: 40,272
- 2) Football: 21,878
- 3) Baseball and Softball: 18,246
- 4) Basketball: 14,952
- 5) Skateboards/Scooters: 14,783

*based on US A&E statistics

Football, hockey, squash, tag rugby

Most children should be able to do these sports in PE lessons without wearing protective headgear. However, if the standard is very high and there are lots of fast, hard balls flying around then it would be sensible to wear protective head gear.

Tennis, badminton, running, rounders, athletics, trampolining, dance

There is no need to take off the external parts or wear protective headgear. Take care that the device does not fall off.

Gymnastics

Treadmills in gyms: Check that the equipment is properly earthed or you may receive a static electric shock.

Plastic gym mats: The external equipment should be taken off to protect it and not risk problems with static electricity. The biggest consideration at school is keeping the processor in place. It is unlikely that students in school PE lessons will have enough contact with plastic mats for the processor to be at risk from static electricity but those in a gym club or in competitions might.

Water sports - (swimming, diving in shallow water >5m deep, sailing, snorkelling etc.) Most water sports do not pose extra risks for cochlear implant users as long as the sound processor is waterproofed. With goggles or a diving mask, make sure that the elastic is not too tight over the site of the implant under the skin. Scuba diving is not recommended at depths below 20m as pressure may damage the implant.

Aqua Accessory tips: Don't try to squeeze all the air out of the protective bag. With some air in the bag, it will float. Test whether it floats before using it. A brightly coloured bag would be easier to spot if it comes off so put a coloured Post-it® note in the bag/box.

Contact sports

Boxing, rugby, judo, karate, American football etc.

Cochlear implant users are strongly advised against sports in which physical injury, pressure or blows to the head are likely. American football is a bit more intense, with rear-side impacts not completely unlikely, but a regular football helmet should be good enough to protect an implant. The implants have titanium cases, and are probably stronger than your skull.

Extra-curricular activities

Pot holing, Canoeing, Caving

External parts should be waterproofed. Very careful supervision is needed. Very careful and clear instructions need to be given to the children before starting the activity and a very high adult to child ratio is essential.

Fun fair rides

Rides which involve high speeds and / or extreme forces may risk moving the internal parts of the cochlear implant and so are not recommended. If these are very fast, it may be better to remove the external parts of the system to a safe place so they will not get lost as there will be no need to listen anyhow.

Laser Quest

There may be a risk due to the static electricity generated by the nylon suits so it may be best to remove the external equipment. Care should also be taken that the strap of the goggles does not fit too tightly over the site of the implant package.

Static hints and tips

- Avoid static-causing situations like plastic play equipment, bouncy castles, balloons, ball pools, etc. or remove the CI processors before jumping in!
- Clothing can also be a source of static. When dressing in layers, choose clothing made from natural fibres. Synthetics tend to generate more static.
- Give your child a “rub down” using dryer sheets to reduce static. Repeat this after going outside to play or whenever you start to see their hair stand on end! A mixture of part water, part fabric softener in a spray bottle also does the trick.
- Teach children to “ground” themselves by touching something metal attached to the earth (like a lamppost) to get rid of static electricity.
- Have the contact information for your audiologist on hand so that you can contact them quickly if a processor “zap” occurs.

While it’s important to take necessary precautions to minimize static electricity for cochlear implant users, if you incorporate these simple suggestions into everyday life, static needn’t be a huge worry. Processor “zaps” are rare, and quickly sorted out by an audiologist replacing the programmes.

Managing your cochlear implant during sports

Behind The Ear processor with sunglasses and hats - there are different ways of keeping a processor on.

SUITABLE FOR ALL BTE PROCESSORS

Skeleton ear moulds.

Gear For Ears : Ear Gear Cochlear is a neoprene cover and clip – great for skiing

Full 90 Soccer Head Protection – although your processor could still move around

Tuck the processor inside the headband of a baseball cap – but always wear a helmet when you ride a bike!

Huggies – Available from your audiologist, Huggie Aids, or Advanced Bionics

Kinder clip – This has a longer wire and a holder for the processor that clips onto your clothes Available from Advanced Bionics or Connevans

Critter clip – great fun for kids. Available from Connevans

AB Powercel Adapter – enables the processor to be worn off the ear

T-mic retainer earmould

Reconditioned PSP body processor – You can put a ziploc bag upside-down over the headpiece to protect it from sweat or rain.

OTHER USEFUL THINGS

A thin sweatband which wicks away moisture

Baseball cap

Wig tape available from beauty stores. Don't use too much, it might ruin your Skinit!

Double sided tape

Reflective vest – with fabric paint or wide tipped fabric marker, write “Deaf” – this can be useful when running and alert other runners