

PRACTICE BRIEF: EMERGENCY CARE

Athletic Training

How should football face masks be removed to minimize cervical spine movement and provide quick access for airway management?

While maintaining stabilization of the cervical spine, remove the face mask's side loop straps followed by top loop straps. If the helmet design allows, first unfasten straps using any quick-release mechanisms. To remove loop straps without a quick-release mechanism, a cordless, battery-operated screwdriver should be used. If the screwdriver fails to remove the screw, a cutting tool should be used to clip the loop straps (combined tool approach). Finally, athletic trainers should be prepared to remove the helmet and shoulder pads if the face mask cannot be removed or if the fit of the helmet is insufficient to stabilize the head and neck.



Rationale

The current standard of care for football players who have sustained potentially serious cervical spine injuries is to stabilize the head and neck and remove the face mask prior to transportation. Current evidence supports the technique described above (quick-release mechanism → cordless screwdriver → cutting tool) because it can be performed quickly while minimizing cervical spine motion.

Athletic trainers must be familiar with the wide variety of helmets and face mask attachments and should practice all techniques until the face mask removal process is efficient and quick. Practice sessions should reflect venue-specific emergency action plans and current personnel assignments, and should be held at least annually and documented.

This Practice Brief addresses football face mask removal in a correctly-fitted helmet and is not intended to provide full instruction on the management of potentially catastrophic cervical spine injuries.

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