Knocks on the head are something every kid should expect in competitive sports, right?

From an early age we learn to “get tough,” “get back in the game” or that getting “dinged” is just part of contact sports.

“Not necessarily so,” said Dr. Joann Schaefer, Nebraska’s Chief Medical Officer and Director of Public Health for the Department of Health and Human Services.

“There’s a new awareness that a ding might just be a concussion, which is a type of traumatic brain injury caused by a bump, blow or jolt to the head that can change the way the athlete’s brain normally works. Sometimes a concussion is serious before the athlete, coach or parents even realize it,” she said.

A concussion can have short term and long term consequences, which may include a headache, vomiting or nausea, weakness, dizziness, blurred vision, concentration and memory problems, irritability and even death.

Players who received multiple concussions are more likely to have thinking problems, depression and other brain-related issues, including dementia. Fortunately, 90 percent of athletes who experience a single minor concussion usually recover completely in a few days to several weeks.

Nebraska’s Concussion Awareness Act became effective July 1, mandating concussion education for coaches, parents and players.

It also sets rules of play for youths suspected of having a concussion, spelling out how coaches will handle suspected concussions and that young athletes not be allowed to return to play until written approval from an appropriate licensed healthcare professional and the youth’s parent or guardian is obtained.

“Concussions are serious business,” advised Schaefer.

“If there’s any indication that the athlete may have suffered a ‘ding’ or blow to the head, then it’s imperative to evaluate the player for a possible concussion to avoid problems down the road,” she said.

No specific training is mandated. However, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services offers a free online 15- to 20-minute training program at www.dhhs.ne.gov/concussions.

The new law requires no record-keeping, no additional spending and no penalties for noncompliance.

Additional information is available at www.headsupne braska.com.

During 2010, sports-related concussions accounted for 299 emergency department visits and six hospitalizations among Nebraskans under age 19, according to the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services Injury Prevention and Control Program.

Other concussions resulted from motor vehicle accidents, falls and events involving unintentional impact.

According to national findings by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only about one in 10 concussion-related injuries are reported and tracked, making the true scope of the problem extremely difficult to predict.