# American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Administrators Annual Sports Injury Study

**ABSTRACT**

**Background**:
The purpose of this study is to ascertain the risk of participation in cheerleading and address previous data misinterpretations and sensationalism in recent media reports. A number of recent articles falsely claim that cheerleading is the most dangerous athletic activity, more dangerous than football and hockey. These articles misrepresent information from two primary sources: The National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injuries at the University of North Carolina (NCCSI) and the Consumer Product Safety Commission's Emergency Room visit study (NEISS).

**Method:**
To determine the "danger" of an activity compared to other activities it is important to measure the actual "risk" of injury from performing that activity. The risk of participating in athletics is determined by calculating the number of injuries per athletic exposure, designated as "injuries per AE".

To compare the risk of catastrophic injury, we analyzed the data from the NCCSI study and compared the "injuries per 100,000 participants" for cheerleading to the other sports discussed in the study. To compare the risk of an emergency room visit, we analyzed the data from the CPSC study for other traditional female sports and used participation figures provided by American Sports Data to produce a measureable risk assessment.

**Results:**
When factoring in participation and the extended season for cheerleading, an analysis of the NCCSI data shows that there are ten high school sports – including girl's ice hockey, gymnastics and soccer - with a higher risk of catastrophic injury than for cheerleading and seventeen high school sports with a lower risk of catastrophic injury. The data clearly demonstrates that football is the leading cause of catastrophic injury in high school and college sports, with 63.5% of all catastrophic injuries.

Participation figures from American Sports Data suggest that the increase in emergency room visits by cheerleaders corresponds with a rise in cheerleading participation attributable to the development and growth of non-school affiliated cheerleading commonly referred to as "all-star" cheerleading. In addition, the incidence of cheerleading emergency room visits is lower than that of girls' soccer, basketball and softball.

**Conclusions:**
The data analyzed in this study clearly shows that the risks associated with cheerleading are in line with other male and female school sports, and are much lower than the risks associated with football. It also shows that there is room for improvement at all levels of cheerleading. The study also illuminates the need for more detailed studies that include "injuries per exposure". Fortunately, the National Federation of High Schools has added cheerleading to its annual NFHS Injury Surveillance Study with data forthcoming in 2010. A similar study for other levels of cheerleading including college, all star and youth recreation league cheerleading would be beneficial to understanding and minimizing the risk of participation. It is important to recognize that the numbers included in these studies represent real people, and every effort should be made to provide an environment that minimizes the risks associated with the activity.

Further, the study provides recommendations from the AACCA to help reduce the risk associated with cheerleading participation. Included in these recommendations are that coaches should be AACCA Safety Certified and follow established safety rules, and programs should establish and practice an emergency action plan.

**Source Information**
From the American Association of Cheerleading Coaches and Administrators which represents more than 20,000 cheerleading coaches and is the leading advocate of cheerleading safety in the U.S. Address reprint requests to Jim Lord, executive director, AACCA, at jimlord@aacca.org.