HEAD CONTACT PROCESS

Effective: 1 November 2026

Overview

Player welfare drives World Rugby's decision-making for zero tolerance of foul play, especially where head contact occurs. The Head Contact Process (HCP) is a Law Application Guideline designed to protect the head, neck and throat area of players. The intent of the HCP is to aid consistency in the application of sanctions by providing guidance on how contact with the head should be approached by match officials and disciplinary personnel.

The assessment must focus on the actions of the players and the nature of the contact and not the outcome. The absence of injury, or whether a HIA is required, is not determinative of the degree of danger.

The HCP can be applied to:

- High tackles
- Shoulder charges
- Dangerous cleanouts
- Head-to-head collisions
- Leading elbow / forearm

Notwithstanding the guidance of the HCP, under Law 9.11, the referee is always entitled to issue a red or yellow card for anything deemed to be reckless or dangerous.

Process questions and considerations

1. Has head contact occurred?

Head contact includes the neck and throat area.

2. Was there any foul play?

Considerations include:

- Avoidable contact vs Unavoidable contact
- Upright tackler vs Tackler bent at the hips and knees
- Cleaner (arriving player) in control and attempting to wrap/bind with no opportunity to adjust

3. What was the degree of danger?

Considerations include:

- Direct vs Indirect contact
- High vs Low force
- Level of speed/control

4. Is there any mitigation?

Considerations include:

- No time or space to adjust
- Late changes in dynamics

All factors present in the player's action and event must be assessed in totality

Trigger words for match officials

Match officials may wish to use the non-exhaustive list of trigger words below to help them identify whether a player is at fault, the degree of danger involved and whether any mitigation should be applied.

PLAY ON – No fault

- Unavoidable or involuntary collision
- Tackler legal with a sudden and significant drop in height by the ball carrier
- Cleaner (arriving player) in control and attempting to wrap/bind with no opportunity to adjust
- Ball carriers elbow/forearm is close to the body/ball (not leading into contact)

PK – Low danger
YC – Not high danger

- Indirect/secondary contact
- Low force
- Low speed
- Passive tackler (upright)

RC – High danger

- Direct contact
- High force
- High speed
- Lack of control
- Shoulder charge
- Active tackler (upright)
- Targeting a vulnerable player
- Swinging or stiff-arm tackle
- Leading with the head, elbow or forearm

MITIGATION

- No time or space to adjust
- Late change in dynamics (e.g. due to another player in the contact area)
- Sudden and significant drop in height or change in direction from the ball carrier
- Cleaner (arriving player) in control with late head movement from opponent at the breakdown

Mitigation will not apply for always-illegal acts of foul play

General Definitions

Shoulder charge

The arm of the shoulder initiating contact is behind the tacklers body, by their side with palm backwards or fist clenched, or tucked in a sling position at contact.

Always illegal

A player who does not genuinely try to execute a lawful rugby action. This could include actions such as a shoulder charge, leading with the head, or stiff-arm tackle.

Avoidable

Player has the opportunity and means to target their contact away from the head.

Vulnerable

A player who is not in a position to anticipate, avoid, or protect themselves from contact.

Tackle Definitions

Avoidable – Tackle

Tacklers should attempt to reduce their height and target their contact away from the head. They are liable to sanction under the HCP if they come into contact upright.

Upright

Tacklers who are not sufficiently bent at the hips and knees.

Active

Tacklers body moves forwards, sideways or upwards, driving through the hip/legs/shoulders into contact with the ball carrier, the feet may be stationary or moving.

Passive

Tackler has feet planted and absorbs or falls backwards at contact with no movement into the ball carrier.

Cleanout Definitions

Avoidable – Cleanout

Cleaners (arriving players) should control their entry and target their contact away from the head. They are liable to sanction under the HCP if they lack control, do not attempt to wrap/bind, or when there was an opportunity to adjust their action.

Control

Chasing their feet on arrival and attempting a driving action rather than diving off feet.

Opportunity to adjust

Arriving with sufficient time and space to avoid head contact. When players are arriving at a similar time to the contest for the ball, or when there is a sudden and significant movement of the opponent, there is no opportunity to adjust.

Dynamic

A breakdown situation where the contest is live with moving players.

Static

A breakdown situation that is stationary.

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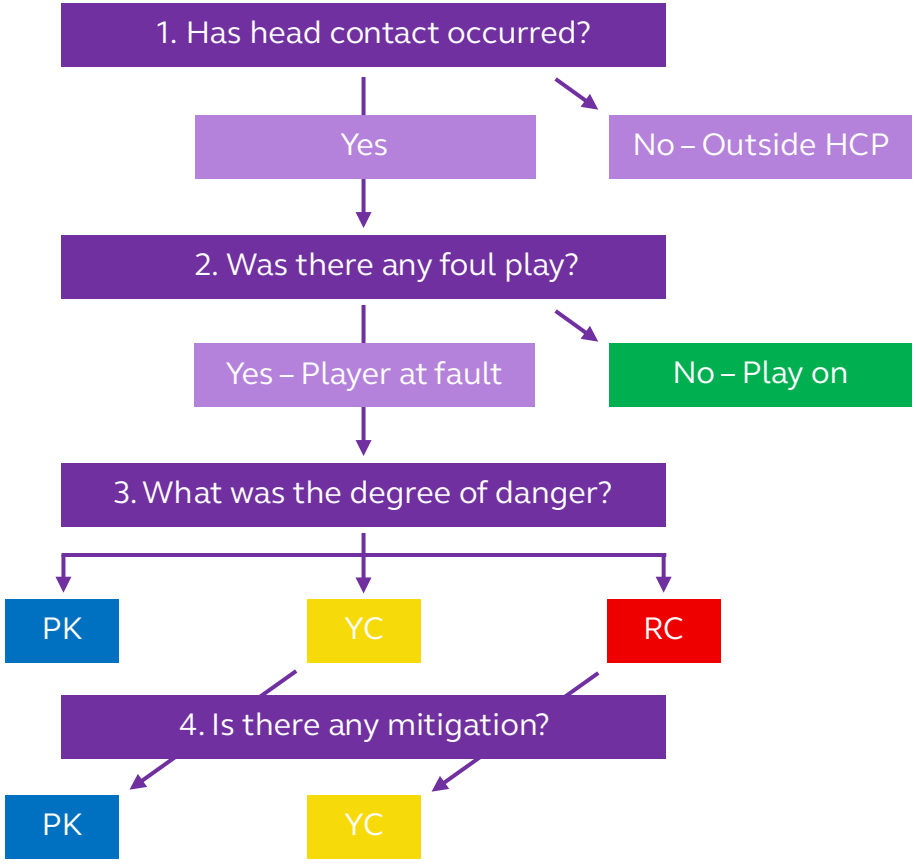

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