TOPIC: Heelys®,

Heelys®, the sneakers that turn into roller skates, are so popular that shoe stores can hardly keep up with the demand.

Heelys are a brand of wheeled sneakers and athletic shoes with a single neoprene wheel in the heel of the shoe that allows a user to roll on smooth surfaces instead of walking. However, Heelys are not the only wheeled athletic shoe.

They were just the first of many1 and like Kleenex® or Jell-O®, their name has become synonymous with the whole genera. While Heelys' wheels are not retractable (they are either installed for heeling or are removed for walking), their competitors wheels generally are, with one, two, and even four wheel models. One manufacturer has two wheels that can be retracted individually. Two and four-wheel models are always placed in the heel and ball of the shoe (with the exception of Heelys' training models that have a second smaller wheel in front of the primary wheel — when the user becomes adept at using the shoes the small wheel is meant to be removed).

The shoes all have a standard walking mode, where the wheels are not engaged. For heeling the user either installs the wheels (Heelys brand) or pushes a button that causes the wheel(s) to drop out of the wheel-well(s) and into position. Heeling is done by raising the ball of one foot, finding a balance point, and then pushing off with the other foot, which is then placed on the ground with the toe elevated — Voilà! You are heeling.

The debate about safety

Ban them, say many, including World Against Toys Causing Harm, Inc. (WATCH, a non-profit toy safety advocacy group), who in 2006 selected Heelys as one of the 10 Worst Toys. CBS pointed out that the number of injuries to children has risen with the sales of Heelys. Concussions, fractures, lacerations and even one death (a boy died while wearing his Heelys when he collided with a car) have been reported. A 2006 study published in the Singapore Medical Journal identified 37 patients with significant injuries sustained while heeling. Upper limb injuries were by far the most common. The researchers concluded that heeling can lead to serious injuries despite their relatively low speed, especially when children do not use safety gear, as in the incidents studied. Children and their parents need to be educated on the use of safety gear.

In an Irish study late last year, 67 children (56 girls and 11 boys) during a 10-week period suffered orthopedic injuries while using Heelys or street gliders. Upper limbs were injured the most, with fractures of the distal radius being most prevalent, then supracondylar fractures, elbow dislocations, and hand fractures. Most suffered the injury while heeling or street gliding outdoors. First usage caused 20% of the injuries and 36% of the injuries occurred while still learning (i.e., used less than five times). None of the children used protective gear. Study author Dr. Mihai Vioreanu states The results are pretty amazing. He says that the unnatural balance necessary to successfully pilot the shoes probably is a contributing factor to the injuries. Overall, the physicians concluded that these "injuries have a serious impact on child health and constitute a burden for the pediatric orthopedic service" and recommended “close supervision of children using Heelys or Street Gliders during the steep learning curve and usage of protective gear at all times.”

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REFERENCES


Bless them says a study by Heiden Associates, a Washington D.C based product safety consulting firm. They analyzed more than two million CPSC (Consumer Product Safety Commission) incident reports from 01/2001 through 09/2006 and the conclusion of Dr. Edward J. Heiden, president of Heiden Associates was that Taking into account the number of pairs sold, HEELYS remains one of the safest outdoor recreational activities. The numbers showed heeling far safer than basketball, baseball, soccer, skateboarding, and in-line skating; only bowling, billiards, and ping-pong had less injuries.

The manufacturer is clear: "Heelys skate shoes can be dangerous...this product should be used with the same safety precautions as other wheeled footwear -- including helmets, elbow pads, wrist guards, gloves, kneepads, and padded clothing." Every photo and video on their website shows kids so protected. They place a sticker on the bottom of every shoe that in essence says "...by peeling off this sticker you agree to waive the right to sue Heelys for any injury from using these shoes."

The real issue

Some physicians decry the use of Heelys because of injuries that they have treated; others endorse them because Heelys are getting kids to exercise who have been sedentary. The studies show that the injuries are being experienced by children who are using them without the prescribed protection, that over 50% of the injuries occur to kids who have used their Heelys five times or less, and that Heelys are far safer than any other wheeled sport (or virtually any sport for that matter).

The real issue is not, or at least should not be, about the shoes -- it is about appropriate behavior in a specified place. Should the use of Heelys be allowed in the halls of a YMCA or shopping mall or school? They probably should not, but for reasons of respect and responsibility; because of the injury potential to others either by being struck or by being startled by someone whizzing past them, not because kids get hurt and parents might sue.

What we know

- Indoor floors are a great place for heeling -- smooth surfaces without cracks, bumps, or rocks, etc.
- Other places of public accommodation are beginning to ban the use of Heelys in their facilities
- We presently do not allow other wheeled sporting equipment (e.g., in-line or roller skates, skateboards, bicycles, or tricycles) to be used in our hallways

What we should do

- Because of the potential for injury to others we should not allow the use of Heelys or roller-shoes to ever be used in our hallways or other areas not specifically designed for such activity. (Like cellphones, banning their presence from the facility may be unmanageable and unenforceable -- when not in use they are unobtrusive and could be easily not noticed by staff; however, their use is clearly viewable and thus more readily controllable.)
- Because of the potential for injury to those heeling we should not allow heeling anywhere on YMCA premises without proper supervision and the use of appropriate safety equipment (i.e., helmet, wrist guards, knee and elbow pads)
- Post our intent regarding heeling. Possible wording for common area signage might be:
  - "No use of Heelys or roller shoes is allowed in this facility."

Please call us at 800-463-8546 to discuss this or any other risk management safety tip, or visit our web site at www.redwoodsgroup.com to learn more about YMCA risk management issues.