

Recovering from Concussion

Concussion Education for Adults



OSF HEALTHCARE
Illinois Neurological Institute

WHAT IS A CONCUSSION?

A concussion is a type of traumatic brain injury that changes the way the brain normally works. Proper recognition and response to concussion can prevent further injury and help with recovery. All concussions are serious and affect people differently.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

The signs and symptoms of concussion can show up right after an injury, or they may not appear or be noticed until hours or days later. These can include:

- Headache
- Nausea, vomiting
- Balance problems, dizziness
- Light and sound sensitivity
- Feeling sluggish
- Concentration or memory problems

With time and proper management these should improve.



RECOVERY

Most people with a concussion recover quickly and fully. Usually, 80 percent recover fully in four weeks with proper management. During recovery, it is important to know that many people have a range of symptoms. Some symptoms may appear right away, while others may not be noticed until you try to do your usual activities.

Ignoring the symptoms and trying to “tough it out” often makes symptoms worse. Be patient because healing takes time. If symptoms come back or new ones arise as you become more active, then that is a sign you are pushing yourself too hard. Stop and take more time to rest and recover. As the days go by, you can expect to gradually feel better.

DAILY ACTIVITIES

It is important to rest the brain (cognitive rest) and the body (physical rest) for a few days, and then begin to gradually return to daily activities as tolerated. If symptoms worsen or return, lessen your activities, then try again to increase gradually. Your health care provider will help guide you on how to return.

WORK

Concussion may impact your ability to focus and concentrate at work. It is reasonable to miss 2–5 days of work after a concussion, but extended absence is uncommon. If any particular activity worsens your symptoms, you should abstain from that activity until it no longer causes symptom worsening. Do what you can tolerate and increase your exposure as you are able. Take frequent breaks. Do not “overdo” cognitive activity. This can prolong your recovery. A letter for your employer recommending accommodations can be created if needed.

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EXERCISE

You may begin to gradually return to exercise and recreational activities as tolerated. Activity is recommended after the first 48 hours unless directed otherwise by your provider. Expose the brain to physical stimulation and then rest. Avoid activities that are physically demanding until your symptoms are stable and improving. As always, avoid additional trauma or risk of repeat brain injury.

WELLNESS AFTER CONCUSSION

NUTRITION: Excellent nutrition can improve performance and reduce injuries. Focus on small, frequent meals/snacks with complex carbohydrates and protein. Limit processed foods, saturated fat and sodium. Do not skip meals. The brain needs fuel to heal from the injury.

HYDRATION: Adequate hydration prevents headaches. Drink enough fluid, preferably water, to stay hydrated. Fluid intake should be increased when active or outdoors. Avoid caffeine, which causes dehydration and over-stimulates your brain cells. Avoid alcohol.

VITAMINS/SUPPLEMENTS: Certain vitamins may be recommended based on your individual needs and can include magnesium, vitamin D, melatonin and omega-3 fatty acids.

SLEEP: Sleep is critical to your performance and well-being. Adequate sleep can prevent headaches, reduce drowsiness and improve your mood. Limit daytime naps to 30 minutes to allow for full rest overnight. Establish a routine with a consistent bed time and wake time and limit screen use before bed. Use your bed only for sleeping to make falling asleep easier. Avoid sleeping tablets unless directed by your provider. Avoid alcohol, caffeine and nicotine.

HEADACHES

It is normal to have headaches after a concussion. Headaches are the most commonly reported post-concussion symptom. For mild headaches, we recommend you “let them be” to prevent frequent usage of pain medications that can make the pain worse. Take a break, drink water and know that it will get better. For headaches you feel are moderate to severe, you can take over-the-counter pain medication. Do not take pain medication to prevent a headache. Avoid cognitive fatigue headaches by decreasing stimulation throughout the day that can tire the brain and cause headaches. Many times, lifestyle factors can trigger headaches or make headaches worse. Making simple changes can often make a big difference in whether or not headaches occur, so be sure to drink plenty of fluid, eat a well-balanced diet and get good rest/sleep.

MOOD AND STRESS

Keep a positive and optimistic outlook. Feel confident in the healing process, know that you are improving and have realistic expectations. Stress, irritability, sadness and anxiety are common and normal reactions to having to cope with your symptoms and the changes in your lifestyle. Find ways to relax, such as music, meditation, writing, prayer and slow deep breathing.

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