



Children's Hospital Colorado  
Orthopedics Institute

# CONCUSSION PROGRAM

## Information for Parents

### What is a concussion?

A concussion is a mild injury to the brain that disrupts how the brain normally works. Usually caused by a sudden blow or jolt to the head, one does NOT need to be knocked out or lose consciousness to have a concussion. Another term for concussion is mild traumatic brain injury (mild TBI). Even though a concussion might be called a “mild” injury, it still must be taken seriously because it is an injury to the brain.

### What should parents do in the first days after a concussion?

A medical doctor should be involved in your child's care because, in rare cases, severe medical problems occur. Watch your child carefully for the first one to two days after injury. Giving acetaminophen (Tylenol) for headaches is OK, but no other medications should be given during this time without a doctor's approval. Seek IMMEDIATE medical help if your child displays:

- A headache that gets worse, lasts for a long time or is severe
- Confusion, extreme sleepiness or trouble waking up
- Vomiting three or more times
- Weakness, numbness or trouble walking or talking
- A seizure or convulsion (arms or legs shake uncontrollably)
- Any other sudden change in thinking or behavior

### What should you generally expect?

Most young people recover completely from a concussion within one to two weeks. But, some people can take longer to recover. Common problems seen after a concussion are listed below. Talk with your child's doctor about any changes you see in the following areas.

#### Physical

- Headaches
- Sick to stomach or vomiting
- Dizziness or balance problems
- Low energy or being run down
- Trouble with vision/seeing
- Bothered by light or noise
- Sleep problems

#### Behavioral or Emotional

- Irritability or grouchiness
- Easily upset or frustrated
- Nervousness
- Sadness
- Acting without thinking
- Any personality change

#### Thinking (Cognitive)

- Slowed thinking
- Trouble paying attention
- Difficulty remembering
- Acting like “in a fog”
- Easily confused
- Poorer school performance

#### Reasons to consider seeing medical or concussion specialists include:

- Any of the above problems last more than two weeks
- Any problem seems especially severe
- Your child has had more than one concussion
- Your child has a more severe injury to the brain (e.g., an injury with bleeding or bruising seen on a CT or MRI scan)

### How can you help?

A concussion can be scary and stressful, but most problems will be short-lived. We recommend following these guidelines as your child heals.

- **Keep your child safe.** It is important your child does not hit his or her head again while healing. Your child will need to take a break from sports and other activities that might cause another head injury. (See “When should young people play sports again?” for more information.)
- **Have your child rest.** Doing too much too soon after a concussion may worsen problems. In the first days after injury, he or she will probably need more “down time” than usual to rest and relax.
- **Make sure your child gets enough sleep and eats properly.** Allow daytime naps and make sure your child gets plenty of sleep at night. Also, make sure he or she eats healthy foods and drinks plenty of water.
- **Allow extra time to finish things.** Some children may be a little slower in how they do things after a concussion. Allow more time than usual to finish tasks.
- **Give more chances to learn.** Remembering things might be harder for a while. When learning, first make sure your child is paying attention. He or she might also need to hear or see information more times than usual.
- **Allow more breaks.** Paying attention during hard or boring tasks might be difficult. Have your child take breaks when doing homework and other similar tasks.
- **Be patient.** Your child might seem cranky, more easily upset, or more tired and forgetful. Be patient and understanding when this happens. If the behavior continues, talk with a doctor.



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### What should you do about school?

A concussion can be scary and stressful, but most problems will be short-lived. We recommend following these guidelines as your child heals.

- Most students can return to school within a few days. If you have questions about when your child should return, ask a doctor.
- Tell your child's school teacher, counselor, nurse, and/or administrators (e.g., principal) that your child had a concussion, even if the concussion happened over the summer.
- Ask the school staff to watch your child carefully for the common physical, thinking, and behavioral problems listed earlier.
- If problems arise, your child might need extra help. Talk with your child's teacher or counselor to arrange this support. Possible help includes:
  - Not asking students to do all of the work they missed and giving extra help so they can catch up
  - Allowing rest time or breaks during the day
  - Lessening homework and class work
  - Allowing assignments to be turned in late
  - Postponing tests until the student is back to normal
  - Giving extra time to complete tests
  - Providing special seating to help the student focus and to allow the teacher to carefully watch the student
  - Limiting risky physical education and/or recess activities until the student is back to normal
- If school problems last more than two to three weeks, your child should be checked by a team of healthcare and/or school professionals familiar with concussion. Medical doctors should be asked about any physical problems (e.g., headaches, dizziness). A special type of evaluation called a neuropsychological assessment could also be useful, especially for any changes that are seen in how the student is thinking, learning or behaving.

### Special notes about helmets

- Bicycle helmets involved in a crash should be replaced. Even if there is no visible damage, the helmet may not protect your child as well in the next crash.
- Helmets used for contact sports (e.g., football, hockey, lacrosse) should have a National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment (NOCSAE) stamp of approval on them. The stamp is usually found on the back or side of the helmet.
- Helmets should not be purchased "used" because the history and care of the helmet are unknown.
- Helmets should only be used for the sport for which they are designed. For example, a ski helmet should only be used for skiing/snowboarding NOT for other activities.
- Children are much more likely to wear helmets if their parents/guardians wear helmets!

### When should young people play sports again or return to their normal physical activities?

As long as your child is "symptomatic"—meaning that any post-concussion physical, thinking or behavioral problems are seen at rest or with activity—he or she should not do anything that might cause another concussion. The following activities should be limited until your child is cleared by a doctor.

- Contact sports (football, hockey, soccer, wrestling, basketball, volleyball, lacrosse, etc.)
- Riding a bike, scooter, motorcycle, ATV, 4-wheeler, or horse
- Driving a car
- Skateboarding, rollerblading, ice-skating
- Snow or water skiing, snowboarding, sledding
- Martial arts
- Gymnastics
- Jumping on a trampoline or any climbing activities (on playground equipment, trees, etc.)
- Any other activity that may cause a head injury

Sometimes neuropsychological or school-based testing can be useful after a concussion. However, these types of evaluations should not be used by themselves to decide whether a child is safe to return to play sports or do other physical activities. A medical doctor should help make this decision. When the doctor says it is safe again, he or she should develop a specific plan to return your child to these activities in a step-by-step, gradual fashion.