

Understanding concussion

a guide for patients, family and friends



Concussion Q&A

What is a concussion?

A concussion is a mild traumatic brain injury that is usually caused by a blow to the head. It is diagnosed based on a change in mental status at the time of the injury (e.g., loss of consciousness, memory loss surrounding the event, or being dazed or confused immediately after the event).

Isn't a concussion just a "ding" to the head?

Use of terms such as "ding" or "he got his bell rung" do not accurately describe the severity of a concussion for many people.

I got my "bell rung" a bunch of times when I was younger, but I was always OK afterward – why isn't my family member?

While most people recover quickly from a concussion, some people don't, for reasons we are still attempting to understand. Some people recover quickly from 1 or 2 concussions, and then have trouble recovering from another event. Not everyone has the same symptoms or the same recovery course.

What kinds of symptoms might you see following a concussion?

Cognitive changes might include feeling "foggy" or confused, slowed processing, difficulties with attention, memory problems, word finding problems, and trouble with thinking through complex tasks. Physical changes might include fatigue, headaches, dizziness, nausea, balance difficulties, noise and light sensitivity, ringing in the ears, and visual difficulties. Common emotional changes include irritability, short temper, anxiety, and depression. An individual who has suffered a concussion may have just a few or many of these symptoms.

What is the role of rest after a concussion?

It is important to rest immediately after a concussion, and this should include "cognitive" rest (e.g., avoiding computer screens, texting, or reading) as well as physical rest. Time off of work, sporting activities or school is important in this stage, just as it would be after any other injury. However, extended periods of rest are not helpful, and may actually worsen the person's functioning. A gradual return to normal activities is the best approach, even though the person may remain symptomatic for a while.

How long does it take to get better?

Most people recover within a few weeks, and almost everyone feels much better by about three months after a concussion.

Why do some people NOT get better quickly?

Persistent symptoms (i.e. longer than three months) can be the result of a large number of factors, and it is not always clear why a particular person is not recovering as expected. Some factors include prior head injuries, pre-existing or new medical or mental health problems, chronic pain, sleep problems and compensation-related issues. In some cases, the person may be under too much stress or may be pushing themselves too hard.

What can family and friends DO to support a person with a concussion?



Try to understand what they are going through

- It is a universal complaint among concussion sufferers that others do not understand what is wrong with them because they don't look hurt. Brain injury is often referred to as the "silent injury" because of this. You cannot rely on how the injured person looks to judge their ability to function.
- Remember a time when you had a bad headache or did not sleep well for several days in a row, and then imagine this going on for weeks or months.
- Understand that spouses, partners or others in the house may need to "pick up the slack" while the injured person is healing – and that this might take longer than anyone is expecting at the outset.

Stay positive

- Concussions cause temporary changes in functioning, not permanent changes
- Try not to take irritability or snappiness personally. These behaviours are common following a concussion, and are made worse by fatigue, headaches, and stress. They should slowly resolve.
- Be aware that a supportive, positive environment will lead to a faster, better recovery than a negative, tension-filled environment

Help the person stay engaged socially and participating in enjoyable recreational activities, but within tolerable limits

- Avoid loud, busy restaurants, clubs, movies, and large gatherings. Try quiet, low-key meals, picnics, or small gatherings at home
- Allow the injured person to "escape" from a social situation when they feel they need to, either for a break or for the rest of the event
- Plan short activities with people who are easy to be around

Reinforce a slow and gradual return to normal activities, with the expectation of a full return of function over time.

- Encourage daily physical activity, at an intensity that does not trigger symptoms

Recognize that many situations require mental processing that is draining for the person recovering from a concussion, even if others do not recognize those situations as demanding

- Background noise, bright lights, the need to make a lot of decisions, and cognitively-demanding tasks can be

Take care of yourself!

- This is key, to ensure you've got the patience and resilience to deal with your injured loved one in a kind and loving manner over what may be a longer time than anyone was expecting.

What is NOT helpful?



- Telling the injured person (or implying) that they should just “suck it up” or “push through” or “tough it out”
- An environment that is critical, unsupportive, hostile, or simply uncaring – this leads the injured person to feel isolated and emotionally stressed, and increased stress prevents good recovery
- Insisting upon a high level of social activity or engagement, or participation in activities that are too demanding for the individual

Strategies & tips for the injured person

Managing fatigue, pain and stress is often the key to a successful recovery.

These factors are frequently the true source of symptoms that are mistakenly attributed to the concussion per se (e.g., irritability, attention problems, headaches).

Pay attention to your sleep. Disrupted sleep can be a significant problem after a concussion, exacerbating many other problems. To optimize the chances of a good night's sleep, avoid napping during the day, establish set times to go to bed and arise every day (including the weekends), develop a regular and calming bedtime routine, avoid use of electronics for at least an hour before going to bed, and avoid lying in bed at night for longer than 30 minutes (if necessary, get up and find something relaxing to do until you are sleepy).

Regular exercise (e.g., walking) is one of the most effective things you can do after a concussion to 1) aid in your recovery, 2) improve your sleep, 3) improve your mood and 4) improve your thinking. It is important to take this gradually, only doing as much as you can tolerate without becoming symptomatic, and gradually increasing the frequency, then the duration, and then the intensity of the exercise.

Prioritizing and pacing your activities is important. Allow extra time, and make sure to incorporate regular rest breaks into your activities, especially those that are physically or mentally demanding. Trying to do everything you did before your injury, in the same amount of time, is not realistic and only adds to your stress and increases your symptoms. You can gradually reduce your rest breaks over time.

Use compensatory strategies if you need them. This might include using a dayplanner or electronic schedule to keep track of things, using lists, and avoiding multi-tasking.

Do not fall into the trap of thinking of yourself as “brain-damaged.” Concussions do not cause “brain damage;” they produce temporary disruption of normal brain functions. Long-lasting symptoms are far more likely to be the result of stress, mental health problems, and inadequate sleep than actual neurological injury. Worrying that you might not ever get better can actually increase your symptoms!

Learn relaxation strategies to help you manage your stress, such as deep breathing or visualization exercises. Consider trying mindfulness meditation, yoga, or Tai Chi. These types of activities can be highly beneficial for many areas of your life. Research is now finding that activities like mindfulness meditation actually change your brain structure, in ways that support your ability to pay attention and stay calm. There are many resources online for more information about these techniques, or talk to your health care provider for assistance.

Keep in mind that many of the symptoms you might be experiencing are actually normal problems that most people experience, whether or not they have had a concussion. This includes things like headaches, trouble remembering things, fatigue, irritability, and trouble concentrating. After an injury, many people “forget” that they also experienced such problems before their injury.

Take care of yourself. Find a way to incorporate the things that bring you joy, even if you need to do them in a slightly different way (e.g., watching your favourite sport instead of playing it). Eat well, even if you do not feel like it; choosing wholesome foods helps your brain and body heal and gives you more energy than eating highly processed foods. Count your blessings; keep a gratitude journal. Try to do one good deed for someone each day.

Additional resources

- Concussion 101 (YouTube Clip)
- Brain Injury Association of Canada - www.biac-aclc.ca
- BC Brain Injury Association - www.brainstreams.ca
- Minor Head Injury & Concussion (Headway) - www.headway.org.uk/minor-head-injury-and-concussion.aspx
- Think First - Concussion & Sport - www.thinkfirst.com
- Parachute - Preventing Injuries. Saving Lives. www.parachutecanada.org/thinkfirstcanada
- Concussion Awareness Training Tool - www.cattonline.com

Apps & brain training resources

- HEADWays - Concussion Recovery Self-Management App
- Headspace - Meditation App
- SleepStream - Sleep App
- MindShift - Anxiety Management App (Available through the AnxietyBC website)
- Lumosity.com (brain training resource)
- Positscience.com/brain-resources

