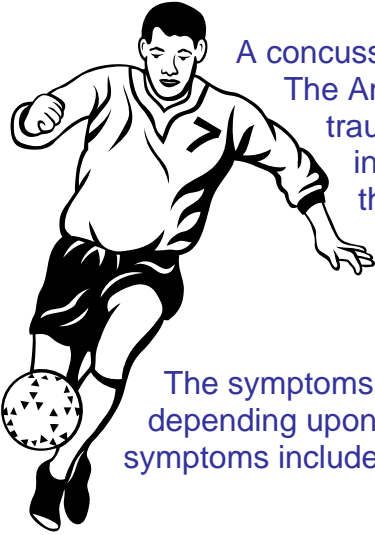


CONCUSSIONS



A concussion is an injury to the brain caused by a blow to the head. The American Academy of Neurology defines concussion as “a trauma-induced alteration in mental status that may or may not involve loss of consciousness. Confusion and amnesia are the hallmarks of concussion.” Often concussions occur while participating in sports, but, of course, they can occur in any kind of accident (automobile, falls at home, etc.).

The symptoms of concussion may be very obvious or very subtle, depending upon the individual and the severity of the injury. Possible symptoms include:

- Headache
- Visual disturbance
- Nausea with or without vomiting
- Dizziness and/or loss of balance
- Confusion, disorientation and/or inability to focus attention
- Amnesia
- Problems with coordination
- Delayed verbal responses to questions and vacant stare
- Slurred or incoherent speech
- Emotions out of proportion to circumstances
- Memory deficits, including asking the same question repeatedly
- Any period of loss of consciousness

The diagnosis of concussion should be made by a physician or healthcare provider experienced in the evaluation of head injuries. The diagnosis may be based exclusively on history and physical exam, or it may be necessary to obtain scans (CT or MRI) or do special neuropsychological testing (often with the use of a computer program).

Usually the symptoms of concussion resolve fairly quickly and most patients return to full activities, including sports, in a week or two. However, sometimes symptoms can last for months or even years. The severity and duration of impairment may be greater with repeated head injuries.

Here are a few tips from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://www.cdc.gov/doc.do?id=0900f3ec8000d36d>) to follow if you have a concussion:

- • Get plenty of sleep at night, and rest during the day.

- • Return to your normal activities gradually, not all at once.
- • Avoid activities that could lead to a second brain injury, such as contact or recreational sports, until your doctor says you are well enough to take part in these activities.
- • Ask your doctor when you can drive a car, ride a bike, or operate heavy equipment because your ability to react may be slower after a brain injury.
- • Talk with your doctor about when you can return to work or school. Ask your doctor about ways to help your employer or teacher understand what has happened to you.
- • Consider talking with your employer about returning to work gradually and changing your work activities until you recover.
- • Take only those drugs that your doctor has approved.
- • Don't drink alcoholic beverages until your doctor says you are well enough to do so. Alcohol and certain other drugs may slow your recovery and can put you at risk of further injury.
- • If it's harder than usual to remember things, write them down.
- • If you're easily distracted, try to do one thing at a time. For example, don't try to watch TV while fixing dinner.
- • Consult with family members or close friends when making important decisions.
- • Don't neglect your basic needs such as eating well and getting enough rest.
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While there is no way to completely eliminate your risk of concussion, there are some preventive steps you can take. Be sure to wear a well-fitted safety helmet for bicycling, motorcycle riding, skateboarding, etc. Use crosswalks and be sure to stop, look and listen when crossing streets. Wear seatbelts with shoulder restraints at all times when in a motor vehicle. Don't drive when excessively fatigued or under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Since there are no easy cures for the symptoms of concussion, the best approach is to prevent them!

Michael J. Huey, MD, February 2004

Helpful Links:

American Academy of Family Physicians patient information web site (familydoctor.org), at <http://familydoctor.org/x2068.xml>

Centers for Disease Control's patient information brochure about concussion and brain injury at <http://www.cdc.gov/doc.do?id=0900f3ec8006c289>.