

# CONCUSSION FACTS

## for Parents and Caregivers of Children and Teens

Young Athlete Center



This fact sheet is for parents of children and teens who have recently had a concussion. It tells you what to expect and shares some helpful suggestions to get your child through the recovery period.

### What is a concussion?

Other terms for a concussion include "head injury" and "mild traumatic brain injury." A concussion usually is caused by a bump, blow, or jolt to the head. In most cases, children hit their heads without getting a concussion. That is because the brain is protected by the skull which is a very hard covering made of bone that works like a helmet. But if the head is hit hard enough, the brain can be shaken around inside the skull causing a concussion.



### What should I do if I think my child has had a concussion?

Contact your child's pediatrician or primary health care provider to determine the need for immediate evaluation or if your child may be able to be observed at home. They should also be able to give advice about what to watch for and restrictions for physical activity and schoolwork.

### Be alert for symptoms that worsen.

In the first 1-2 days after the injury, you should watch your child very carefully. You should get IMMEDIATE medical help if your child:

- Loses consciousness
- Is extremely sleepy or cannot remain awake if stimulated
- Vomits repeatedly
- Develops a severe headache
- Has weakness, numbness, or has difficulty walking normally
- Is very confused
- Has slurred speech or difficulty talking
- Has a seizure (arms and legs shake uncontrollably)
- Cries nonstop and cannot be comforted

### What are symptoms of a concussion?

Be on the lookout for some problems or "symptoms" your child might be experiencing after a concussion. He or she might:

- Have headaches
- Not remember the moment the concussion happened
- Feel dizzy
- Feel "foggy," "zoned out" or "slowed down"
- Have trouble paying attention, thinking or remembering
- Feel fatigued, or tired
- See spots, or have blurry vision
- Feel bothered by noise or light
- Feel nauseous
- Feel annoyed, frustrated or irritable
- Feel sad or cry more easily than usual
- Have trouble sleeping
- Feel worried or nervous
- Have difficulty completing schoolwork as quickly

Because each person's brain and injury is unique, some kids may have only a few symptoms but others may have many. Some kids may have mild symptoms and others may have more severe symptoms. Regardless, it's important to contact your child's pediatrician for a full evaluation if you suspect a concussion. Experiencing concussion symptoms can be scary, but remember that your child's body is telling him/her that the brain is healing and needs extra rest. Most kids feel normal again within two to three weeks, but sometimes it takes longer.

For more information call 314.454.KIDS or 800.678.KIDS

## What can I do to help my child get better?

A concussion can be scary and stressful for both you and your child. It's important to remember that most problems will last for only a short time. As the days go by, you can expect your child to feel better gradually. It's also important to remind yourself that all children occasionally have some of the same problems that can happen after a concussion even when they haven't had a head injury. For example, chances are that your child sometimes was irritable, seemed more tired than usual, or sometimes forgot things even before the accident. Try to deal with these things the same way you did before. You can also help by taking an active role in your child's recovery.

- **Share information.** Tell your child what to expect as he/she gets better. Encourage your child to talk with you about any symptoms he/she is having, and to come to you with any questions or concerns. Children who are given information about their concussion and reassured that they will get better tend to recover more quickly. Sharing information about the concussion with the other important people in your child's life is also recommended so they can understand what has happened and how to help. This includes your child's siblings, teachers and other school staff, coaches, and babysitters.
- **Keep your child safe.** While your child is still experiencing concussion symptoms, it will be especially important to prevent a second concussion. Children who have had more than one concussion can take more time to heal and sometimes start to have longer-term problems. For this reason, your child should take a break from sports and high-risk/high-speed activities that might cause another head injury until he/



she no longer has any concussion symptoms. This can include riding a bike or skateboard, jumping on trampolines or climbing trees.

- **Take it slow.** The brain needs time to heal after a concussion. Children should not return to activity until cleared by their physician. Ignoring symptoms, trying to "tough it out," or doing too much too soon can make problems worse. In the first days after the accident, don't expect too much. Your child will probably need lots of "down time." Exercise or activities that involve a lot of concentration, such as studying, working on the computer, or playing video games may cause concussion symptoms to reappear or get worse. If your child's symptoms come back or new symptoms occur as he/she becomes more active, it's a sign that your child is pushing it too hard. Have your child stop the activity and get some rest, and then take things a bit slower the next time.
- **Provide a healthy lifestyle.** During the time that your child is healing, be sure to offer healthy foods and encourage your child to drink plenty of water.
- **Encourage rest.** For the first 1-2 days, it is okay to allow your child to sleep a little longer than usual or takes naps. However, after the first few days, he/she should resume a more normal sleep schedule with normal bedtimes and wake up times.
- **Reduce distractions.** When your child needs to pay attention, such as when doing homework or talking to you about something important, it will help to provide a quiet place in the house. For example, turn off the radio or television.
- **Provide memory help.** Some children are forgetful after a concussion. You can help by giving directions one step at a time so there is less to remember. When there is more than one step to keep track of, help your child write things down. Your child also may need you to repeat what you have already said and to provide extra reminders.
- **Allow extra time.** Some children can seem slowed down after a concussion. If so, allow more time than usual for your child to answer questions and finish tasks. Make sure your child doesn't feel pressure to get things done quickly.



- **Allow more breaks.** Paying attention, especially during hard or boring tasks, can be difficult after a concussion. Encouraging your child to take short rest breaks when doing homework and other similar tasks will help.
- **Offer emotional support.** Your child may feel upset, frustrated, sad, or angry because he/she cannot return to sports and hobbies right away, cannot keep up with schoolwork, or cannot spend as much time with friends. Talk often with your child about these feelings and give lots of encouragement. It's important for children to know that any restrictions are meant to help them heal and are not meant to be a punishment.
- **Be patient.** After a concussion, your child might seem cranky, irritable, short-tempered, or more emotional and easily upset. Try to be understanding when this happens. Give your child time to calm down before trying to talk through a problem or disagreement. Once your child is calm, you may want to encourage him/her come up with a few different ways to deal with the situation and assist with picking the best one. If the behavior continues, talk with a doctor.

## What about school?

Suggested steps to follow after your child's concussion are listed below.

1. Ask your child's doctor or nurse when it will be okay for your child to go back to school. Most children stay home for a day or two after a concussion. It is ok for kids to resume school but likely will need to do so with some adjustments to their school environment and workload. Research shows that kids who stay home longer than a few days often have worse symptoms and take longer to get better

than those that resume school with adjustments to their school workload and school day.

2. Tell your child's school team (teachers, guidance counselor, nurse, principal, coach) about the concussion even if it happened over the summer. Be sure to share any recommendations you have received from your child's medical team.
3. Have teachers and other school staff monitor your child and encourage your child to communicate with them about their symptoms. Stay in close contact with teachers to share how your child is expressing they feel they are doing at home and in school. This will help with making proper adjustments at school to help their recovery. As your child's symptoms improve, the extra help and support can be reduced.
4. If your child is having any problems at school, talk with his/her teachers about providing extra help right away. If problems last more than a few weeks, a formal written school plan may need to be developed. Possible help that your child's teachers can offer includes:
  - Giving your child a seat near the teacher and in a quiet place
  - Making time to check-in with your child during the school day
  - Adding rest breaks to your child's school schedule
  - Allowing your child to go to the nurse's office if he/she is not feeling well
  - Helping your child get caught up on any missed work
  - Not asking your child to make up all the missed work
  - Reducing assignments and homework

- Allowing assignments to be turned in late
- Allowing extra time to finish tests
- Postponing tests
- Keeping your child out of PE and active recess

5. If problems at school last more than 2-3 weeks, your child may need to be seen by a concussion specialist. That specialist may make modifications to the treatment plan and may recommend specific treatments with medications, physical therapy, or even resuming some light physical activity to help with their recovery.

## When can my child return to normal physical activities including sports?

- Missouri law requires athletes who have sustained a concussion be immediately removed from play and practice for a minimum of 24 hours after a suspected concussion.
- An athlete must receive written clearance from a licensed health care professional to return to formal sports following a concussion.
- If your child is still experiencing symptoms from a concussion, they should not return to full sports participation. Some light, physical activity may be helpful for recovery if a child is still experiencing symptoms a few weeks after their activity, but that should be discussed with the health care professional managing your child's concussion.
- It is recommended that children gradually return to normal sports practice or games once their symptoms from the concussion have resolved.

Your child's doctor or nurse will tell you when it's safe for your child to resume physical activity and help you make a plan to return your child to those activities in a step-by-step, gradual fashion.

Even when your child is recovered from the concussion, you play an important role in helping to do everything possible to prevent another head injury. Children should always:

- Wear a seatbelt in the car
- Wear a helmet when riding a bike
- Wear proper safety gear when playing sports

If you have any questions that were not answered by this fact sheet, ask your child's doctor or nurse for more information.



### References

*Concussion in Children and Teenagers: Information for Parents and Other Caregivers (2006), by Michael W. Kirkwood, PhD, Pamela E. Wilson, MD., & Joseph Wathen, MD.*

*Facts about Concussion and Brain Injury (2010). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [www.cdc.gov/Concussion](http://www.cdc.gov/Concussion).*

### My notes:

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