

Health

The Concussion Discussion: Use Your Head

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Sports, high-contact sports in particular, are among the most common causes of concussions. You are most likely familiar with the term "concussion," but you might not understand what a concussion is or how to determine if you or a teammate has one.

What Is a Concussion?

Concussions are quite common. In fact, serious brain injuries occur about every 21 seconds in the United States. Your brain is made of soft tissue. Spinal fluid surrounds your brain and acts as a cushion between it and your skull. A collision with another player in a soccer game or a blow to the head in the boxing ring can cause your brain to hit the inside walls of your skull. When this happens, your brain can suffer bruising, torn blood vessels and even nerve injury. These issues can lead to temporary loss of normal brain function, more commonly known as a concussion.

Wearing protective headgear when you are playing contact sports, cycling, skiing or riding your skateboard is one of the most important steps you can take to prevent a concussion. But concussions can occur even with the use of the right headgear.

It's important to understand the signs and symptoms of concussions. They are not always easy to recognize, but it's very important that a concussion has time to heal. If you re-enter the game with a concussion, you risk additional injury. Repeated injury to the brain can lead to swelling and long-term disabilities. As a neurologist, I can tell you that I see many young people who have made the mistake of returning to play with a concussion. They have headaches, trouble in school because of problems with their memory, and their parents and friends have noticed changes in their personalities. These long-term issues can be avoided by knowing the symptoms of a concussion and giving it time to heal.

Symptoms of a Concussion

Symptoms of a concussion may include:

- Headaches
- Losing consciousness
- "Seeing stars"
- Feeling lightheaded or dizzy
- Memory loss
- Nausea or vomiting
- Blurred vision
- Light sensitivity
- Fatigue
- Slurred speech
- Saying things that don't make sense
- Mental confusion
- Irritability

If you suspect you or a teammate has sustained a concussion, tell an adult or a coach right away. You will need

to see a physician to determine if you have a concussion and the extent of your injury. Only a physician can clear you to return to play.

Serious brain injuries occur about every 21 seconds in the United States.

Who Are You?

A doctor who is trying to diagnose a concussion may ask simple questions like "Who are you?" and "What day is it?" to check memory and concentration abilities. He or she will also test balance and reflexes and may order testing such as a computed tomography (CT) scan or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to rule out bleeding and other serious issues.

If you do not require hospitalization, your doctor may instruct your parent to wake you up during the night. Your parent will be instructed to contact the doctor if you cannot be easily awakened or if you display symptoms such as confusion or vomiting.

Time to Heal

All athletes want to jump back into their workouts and activities as soon as possible to stay competitive. But, when it comes to concussions, use your head. Your brain needs time to heal. If you reinjure your brain during the recovery process, it will take even longer to heal. Once your symptoms completely clear up you can resume your normal activities, but it often takes the expert eye of your physician or a neurologist to determine whether or not you are symptom-free.



It is important for these lacrosse players, as well as other athletes who play contact sports, to wear helmets (Photo by Jason Schoenrock).

Stay Tuned...

Watch for more information about a new concussion program at WakeMed.

For more information about concussions, talk to your doctor or visit www.wakemed.org.