

Ask the Doctor:

Answers to Your Health Questions

Concussions

By Robert Franks, DO

Q: WHAT IS A CONCUSSION?

A: A concussion is a brain injury caused by a force to the head, or direct force to the face or neck that is transmitted to the head. Concussions are the number one head injury among athletes. They are most likely to occur in football, boxing, hockey, wrestling, gymnastics, lacrosse, soccer, and basketball. People can also get concussions from falls, accidents, and physical violence, such as fighting.

Q: What are the signs and symptoms of a concussion?

A: Early symptoms of a concussion are headaches, dizziness, confusion, ringing in the ears, nausea, vomiting, and visual changes. Not everyone will experience these symptoms. Late symptoms include memory disturbances, poor concentration, irritability, sleep disturbances, personality changes, and fatigue.

Cognitive symptoms may include unawareness of what is happening around the person (e.g., game score, opponent or quarter if playing football), confusion, amnesia, loss of consciousness and inability to detect time, date or place. Physically, someone with a concussion may experience loss of consciousness, impaired conscious state, poor coordination or balance, convulsions/impact seizure, problems walking, slowness in answering questions or following directions, distraction, problems concentrating, nausea/vomiting, vacant stare, glassy eyes, slurred speech, personality changes, and decreased playing ability.

Q: When is medical treatment necessary?

A: Seek immediate medical attention if you think someone has had a concussion. Untreated symptoms may lead to complications. Some of these complications can be fatal.

Q: How is a concussion treated?

A: The doctor will examine the patient to determine whether he/she has had a concussion, and, if so, how serious it is. He may order an MRI or a CT scan to rule out additional or more serious injury.

Most of the time, concussions are treated with rest, and sometimes, medications to relieve the symptoms. **DO NOT** give any medications unless the doctor gives you permission. Aspirin, for example, may contribute to bleeding which may be a complication in a brain injury. Watch the person for several days for neurological deterioration or the development of additional symptoms.

Q: How long will I have symptoms from a concussion?

A: Often the symptoms of concussion last a few days to a week. Unfortunately, they can last much longer, especially if you have had more than one concussion.

Q: What happens if these prolonged symptoms do not resolve?

A: When symptoms last several days, they usually encompass physical as well as cognitive, and possibly psychological, difficulties. These symptoms should be treated by a sports medicine physician who specializes in concussion, a neuropsychologist, sports psychologist or psychiatrist, and possibly a neurologist. These doctors often must work as a team to help clear these persistent concussion symptoms within the athlete.



Q: Why do I need a team of doctors to treat me?

A: When symptoms do not resolve, sometimes more than one doctor needs to help you. Sports medicine doctors can treat physical symptoms with medicines and treat minor cognitive problems after checking your brain function with a neuropsychological computer program such as IMPACT. When more severe cognitive symptoms are present, neuropsychologists may need to administer more in-depth neuropsychological testing to assess brain function to help treat you. Sports psychologists and psychiatrists may be needed to help with emotional features of concussion such as depression.

Q: When can I go back to playing sports?

A: Someone with a concussion should not go back to a sport until he is symptom free and remains so with sports-specific stressors. No athlete should return to play until cleared by his or her physician. Most people recovery fully, but the healing process takes time. The risk of complication from concussion increases when patients are not given adequate time to heal.

Q: Is there anything I can do to prevent a concussion?

A: Using protective equipment and following the rules of a game properly often can help prevent a concussion, but unfortunately, it is a common injury in many sports.

Q: Is there anything that can help my doctors treat me in case I get a concussion?

A: Having a good concussion history, like any part of your medical record, can help doctors determine your treatment. It is now widely accepted that baseline screening of athletes using neuropsychological computer testing such as IMPACT can help give doctors an idea of what your brain function is like before a concussion so that they can follow you with serial testing to track your improvement from concussion symptoms. This addition to concussion management has been deemed so important that the Brain Injury Association of New Jersey has tried to get this computer program into one hundred high schools for this coming school year to help manage concussed athletes.



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