
Head injuries and concussion

Summary

- Always seek medical attention for a head injury.
 - There is no specific treatment for mild head injury other than plenty of rest and not overdoing things. It can take some time for the brain to recover from a head injury and during this time, headaches, dizziness and mild cognitive (thought) problems are common.
 - Don't go to work or school, or resume sporting activity until you have fully recovered.
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The hard skull and facial bones protect the brain, which is a soft organ. If the skull is injured, then the brain becomes more vulnerable. When someone has a knock to the head, the brain moves about and can knock against the skull and facial bones. This type of injury may cause the brain to swell and even bleed.

The most common type of head injury is concussion. Concussion may or may not include loss of consciousness (blackout). The loss of consciousness is often brief and is normally followed by a rapid and complete recovery. Always seek medical attention for a head injury.

First aid for concussion

If you think someone may have a concussion, use the following steps:

1. Check to make sure the scene is safe.
2. Check for loss of consciousness.
3. If the person is unconscious, check their ABC (airway, breathing, circulation)
4. Do not move the person unless absolutely necessary.
5. Check the person's mental awareness.
6. Check the person's eyes.
7. Watch for vomiting.
8. Keep the person awake for a period of time to see if their condition gets worse.
9. Be aware that complaints can subside only to appear later on and be worse.
10. Be aware that children can become worse very quickly.

Treatment for a head injury

While in the emergency department at hospital, you can expect:

- Observation
 - Mild painkillers for any headache
 - To have nothing to eat or drink until further advised
 - Anti-nausea tablets for any nausea or vomiting
 - An x-ray of the neck, if you have any neck pain
 - A CT scan, if needed
 - For a mild head injury, to be discharged home with family or friends. Ask for a certificate for work, if needed.
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Taking care of yourself at home

Be guided by your doctor, but self-care suggestions include:

- Don't drive home from the hospital. Ask someone to give you a lift or catch a taxi.
- Rest quietly for the day.
- Use icepacks over any swollen or painful area.
- Take simple painkillers such as paracetamol for any headache. Check the packet for the right dose.
- Arrange for someone to stay with you for the next 24 hours, in case you need help.
- Don't eat or drink for the first six to 12 hours, unless advised otherwise by the doctor.
- Once you can eat again, have small amounts of light food and drink in moderation.
- Avoid alcohol for at least 24 hours.
- Don't take sedatives or other drugs unless instructed by your doctor.
- Children are allowed to sleep, but should be woken every four hours to check their condition and gauge their reaction to familiar things.

What to expect after a head injury

There is no specific treatment for mild head injury other than plenty of rest and not overdoing things. Keep in mind that:

- It is common to not be able to remember the events surrounding the head injury.
- It is normal to feel more tired than usual.
- It can take some time for the brain to recover from a head injury. During this time, headaches, dizziness and mild cognitive (thought) problems are common.
- Brain function problems can include mood changes and difficulties with concentrating, remembering things and performing complex tasks.
- Most people make a full recovery and the symptoms only last a few days.
- Some people have ongoing symptoms. If this is the case, visit your local doctor.

When to seek urgent medical care

Seek urgent medical care if you have:

- Severe headaches
- Vomited more than twice
- Memory problems
- Blackouts
- A seizure (fit or spasm of arms, legs or face)
- Difficulty staying awake
- Blood or clear fluid coming from your ears or nose
- Neck stiffness
- Numbness, tingling, pins and needles, or weakness in your arms or legs
- Confusion, slurred speech or unusual behaviour
- Blurred or double vision
- Dizziness
- A high temperature, which may indicate the presence of infection

- Any other concerns.

Resuming activities after a head injury

It is best to wait until you are feeling better before you go back to your normal activities. Don't go to work or school until you have fully recovered. The length of time to wait varies, as it depends on the type of work or study that you do and how severe the head injury was. Ask your doctor for advice.

Don't return to sport until all symptoms have gone and you are feeling better. This is because reaction times and thinking will often be slower, so you are at risk of further injury. If you have another head injury before you have fully recovered, this may be even worse than the first head injury.

A second concussion that occurs before your brain recovers from the first – usually within a short period of time (hours, days or weeks) – can slow recovery or increase the likelihood of having long-term problems. In rare cases, repeat concussions can result in brain swelling (oedema), permanent brain damage and even death.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- Your doctor
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital.

Things to remember

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- Don't go to work or school, or resume sporting activity until you have fully recovered.

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