

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT CONCUSSIONS

Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center



U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Francisco V. Gomez I

WHAT IS A CONCUSSION?

A concussion is a head injury resulting from a hit, blow or jolt to the head that may:

- Make you feel dazed or confused (in other words, causes an alteration of consciousness)
- Affect your ability to remember what happened (this is known as post-traumatic amnesia)
- Briefly cause you to lose consciousness

A concussion is also known as mild traumatic brain injury (or mTBI).

This brochure will help you understand the acute effects of concussion and what you can do to help your recovery.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF A CONCUSSION?

Symptoms of a concussion can be physical, cognitive, and/or emotional.

Physical Symptoms:

- Headache
- Sleep disturbances
- Dizziness
- Balance problems
- Nausea/vomiting
- Fatigue
- Visual problems
- Sensitivity to light
- Ringing in ears

Cognitive Symptoms:

- Slowed thinking
- Poor concentration
- Memory problems
- Difficulty finding words

Emotional Symptoms:

- Feeling anxious
- Feeling depressed
- Irritability
- Mood swings

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT?

- Most people fully recover from a concussion. Each person's recovery is different, but symptoms typically improve within hours and resolve completely in a few days to a couple of weeks.
- Immediately or soon after the injury you may experience disorientation, headaches, dizziness, balance difficulties, ringing in the ears, blurred vision, nausea, vomiting and irritability. You may also have problems with attention, concentration or memory.
- These immediate symptoms are temporary for most people right after a concussion. They will go away faster if your brain gets rest – so it is important that you understand what is meant by 'rest,' and to take time to rest and gradually recover.



WHEN SHOULD I GO TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM?

Get to your local emergency department or return to your health care provider immediately if your symptoms become worse or if you experience any of the following:

- Worsening headache
- Slurred speech or difficulty speaking
- Unsteadiness on feet
- Seizures
- Double or blurred vision
- Weakness or numbness in any part of the body
- Decreasing levels of alertness
- Disorientation/confusion (not knowing where you are, difficulty recognizing people or places)
- Any unusual behavior (for example: increased aggression, anger, irritability or crying)
- Repeated vomiting
- Something 'just isn't right'

WHAT SHOULD I DO?

- Maximize downtime and rest. Only do basic things like eating, using the bathroom, showering and sleeping.
- Sleep is the key to your recovery. Get seven to eight hours of sleep and sleep as needed.
- Protect yourself from another concussion by avoiding contact sports, combative training, or crowded environments (where you may collide with others).
- Let others know that you have had a concussion so they can watch out for you.
- Follow your health care provider's instructions and be honest about your symptoms.
- Limit activities that require intense concentration, such as writing reports or playing video games.

WHAT SHOULDN'T I DO?

- Drink caffeine, energy drinks and other "energy-enhancing" products that might interfere with sleep.
- Take any medications (including over-the-counter medicines) unless instructed by your health care provider.
- Take sleeping aids and sedatives – unless your health care provider advises you to take them.
- Perform physical work, heavy lifting or exercise until cleared by your health care provider.
- Drive – until medically cleared to do so.
- Drink alcohol or use drugs.

HOW DOES CONCUSSION AFFECT MY RETURN TO DUTY?

- Symptoms after a concussion can affect your performance, placing the safety of you or your unit at risk.
- You may experience slower reaction time, decreased energy (not feeling as physically or mentally 'quick'), balance problems, and you may be easily distracted. You may also experience difficulty multitasking, processing information, and concentrating.
- These temporary symptoms resolve faster when your brain gets rest, so it is important for you to take time to recover.
- If you resume physical activities (such as physical training and recreational sports) or some 'thinking' (or cognitive) activities (such as reading, computer use, electronic gaming) too early you may make your symptoms worse and actually slow your recovery!
- If you resume physical training, combat operations, or other physical job-related activities before your brain recovers, you increase your risk of another concussion. If you sustain another concussion before healing from the first one, your recovery may take longer.

WHEN CAN I RETURN TO DUTY?

- You should be able to return to duty when your symptoms are none or very mild (0-1 on the Neurobehavioral Symptom Inventory or NSI), or you are symptom free and have had enough time to recover. However recovery is different for each person and depends on the nature and severity of the injury.
- Your health care provider will let you know when it is safe to return to duty.