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on health, emotions, and life.

**Concussions: What to Do**

When you injure yourself, it's usually obvious. If you scrape your knee or break your arm, there will be bleeding, bruising, or swelling to show that some part of your body has been damaged.

But when you hurt your brain — what doctors call a **brain injury** or **concussion** — there's often nothing to see. That can be a little scary because brain injuries can be far more serious than a scrape or broken bone.

People hit their heads all the time — during sports, car accidents, and falls. Most of the time, the injuries aren't serious, but it can be hard to know for sure. That's why **every head injury should be treated like a serious injury until a doctor says it's not.**

**Signs of a Concussion**

**If you hit your head and think you might have a concussion, see a doctor right away.**

How do you know when it's time to call a doctor? Here are some signs you might have a concussion:

* You feel dizzy after bumping your head, and it goes on for more than a couple of minutes.
* You have a headache that goes on for more than a few minutes.
* Things look blurry or you have trouble focusing.
* You throw up or feel like throwing up.
* You have trouble with balance and coordination (things like not being able to catch a ball or walk in a straight line).
* You have a hard time concentrating, thinking, or making decisions.
* You have trouble speaking or you say things that don't make sense.
* You feel confused, sleepy, grouchy, sad, or emotional for no reason.

You don't have to pass out to have a concussion — in fact, **most people who get concussions *don't* pass out**. But if you *do* pass out after hitting your head, you need to get checked out. Sometimes a concussion is an emergency. If someone you're with has any of these problems, call 911 or get the person to a hospital emergency room right away:

* The person passed out and can't be woken up.
* The person has seizures.
* The person's speech is slurred.
* The person seems to be getting more confused, restless, sleepy, or agitated.
* The person has thrown up more than once.
* The person has a headache that gets worse or won't go away.

**What Will the Doctor Do?**

If you have any worries about a head injury, don't take chances — get medical treatment. An undiagnosed concussion can lead to brain damage and mental disability, while proper treatment will help you recover.

To diagnose a concussion, the doctor will ask how and when your injury happened. He or she will want to hear about your symptoms; for example, if you have a headache or trouble focusing. The doctor might ask questions to test your memory and concentration ("Who are you?"/"Where are you?"/"What day is it?").

The doctor will check your nervous system by testing your balance, coordination, nerve function, and reflexes. To look for problems around the brain, doctors sometimes order scans like CT (CAT) scans or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).

If a concussion is serious, a doctor might send you to a hospital for treatment. Otherwise, the doctor will teach you how to [take care of yourself at home](http://teenshealth.org/en/teens/concussions-healing.html). That usually means getting plenty of rest and avoiding some activities. What you can and can't do depends on your concussion, but you might have to stay home from school or limit the [schoolwork](http://teenshealth.org/en/teens/school-concussions.html) and homework you can do.

**Sports Concussions**

**If you hurt your head while playing a sport, stop playing immediately.** Your coach should take you off the field. But if you don't have a coach, or your coach doesn't pull you from play, take yourself out of the game.

If you're skiing or snowboarding, get the ski patrol to help you down the hill. If you're skateboarding or biking, stop riding. Don't take a chance on hurting your head again.

A second head injury can lead to a condition called second-impact syndrome. Second-impact syndrome doesn't happen very often, but it can cause lasting brain damage and even death.

**The First Few Days**

If you hit your head but didn't see a doctor, be on the lookout for signs of a concussion. They can take a few days to show up. If you notice signs of a concussion, even if it's been a couple of days since you hit your head, see a doctor right away.

Here are some of the things that might be signs of a concussion if they've been happening in the days after a head injury:

* headache
* dizziness
* feeling sick or throwing up
* difficulty with coordination or balance
* blurred vision
* slurred speech or saying things that don't make sense
* feeling confused and dazed
* difficulty concentrating, thinking, or making decisions
* trouble remembering things
* feeling sleepy
* having trouble falling asleep
* sleeping more or less than usual
* feeling anxious or irritable for no apparent reason
* feeling sad or more emotional than usual

If a doctor sends you home to get well instead of to a hospital, stay alert for danger signs. Here are some signs of a serious problem:

* You have a headache that gets worse quickly.
* You feel like you're getting more and more confused.
* You keep vomiting.

If you notice these problems — or any other changes that worry you — always call the doctor.

Reviewed by: [Elana Pearl Ben-Joseph, MD](http://teenshealth.org/en/parents/reviewers.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22_b%22%20%5Ct%20%22medical_reviewers)

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# Sports and Concussions

If you play sports or follow professional or college teams, you probably know that concussions are a serious issue. Playing sports increases a person's risk of falls and collisions with objects or other players. These can cause [concussions](http://teenshealth.org/en/teens/concussions.html) — a type of brain injury. That's true of all sports, not just contact sports like football and hockey.



As long as people play sports, there will be concussions from time to time. But wearing the right protective gear and playing the right way can make a brain injury less likely.

If you do get a concussion, take a break from sports. Making sure you [let your brain heal](http://teenshealth.org/en/teens/concussions-healing.html) completely helps prevent long-term problems.

### How Do Concussions Happen?

The brain is soft. The body protects it by cushioning it in cerebrospinal fluid inside a hard skull. Because the brain floats in the fluid, it can move around and even bang against the skull.

A fall or collision that makes the brain bang against the skull can bruise the brain. It also can tear blood vessels and injure nerves. These injuries can cause a concussion — a temporary loss of normal brain function.

There are lots of ways concussions can happen in sports, such as:

* helmet-to-helmet tackles in football
* getting checked against the boards in hockey
* heading a ball incorrectly in soccer
* skateboarding or biking wipeouts
* collisions between skiers or snowboarders

### Preventing Concussions in Sports

#### Start With the Right Equipment

Everyone should wear properly fitting, sport-appropriate headgear and safety equipment when playing contact sports or [biking](http://teenshealth.org/en/teens/bike-safety.html), rollerblading, skateboarding, snowboarding, or skiing. You can't prevent every concussion. But helmets, mouthguards, and other safety gear can reduce the risk of a brain injury.

#### Play it Safe

Headgear is your first line of defense. But you can still get a concussion because helmets don't stop injury from happening on the inside. If you hit your head, your brain can still bang against your skull, even if you're wearing a helmet.

**Don't take chances because you think your headgear protects you**. This is one reason why there are rules in sports. Learning the right technique and developing the skill to avoid dangerous plays can make all kinds of injuries less likely to happen.

### When Concussions Happen

If you hurt your head while playing a sport, stop playing immediately. A coach should know to take you off the field. But if you don't have a coach, or your coach doesn't pull you from play, take yourself out of the game.

If you're skiing or snowboarding, get the ski patrol to help you down the hill. If you're skateboarding or biking, stop riding. **Don't take a chance on hurting your head again.** A second head injury can lead to a condition called **second-impact syndrome**. Second-impact syndrome doesn't happen very often, but it can cause lasting brain damage and even death.

If you hurt your head playing organized sports, a coach or athletic trainer may examine you right after your injury. This is known as **sideline testing** because it might happen on the sidelines during a game. Sideline testing is common in schools and sports leagues. By watching you and doing a few simple tests, a trained person can see if you need medical care.

Lots of schools or sports leagues test players at the start of a sports season to measure their normal brain function. These tests are called **baseline concussion tests**. Coaches, trainers, or doctors often compare these baseline results against sideline tests to see if a player's brain is working OK.

If you were playing a sport and banged your head but didn't do anything about it when it happened, be alert for signs of a concussion. Concussions don't always show up right away. It can take up to 3 days for signs to become obvious.

### When Can I Play Again?

The #1 question athletes ask after a concussion is how soon they can start playing again. The answer is simple: When a doctor tells you it's OK.

Concussions can be tricky: You might feel fine, but your thinking, behavior, and/or balance may not be back to normal. Only a doctor can tell these things for sure.

It's essential to wait until the doctor says it's safe to return to sports, but people sometimes feel pressure to start playing again. They worry about letting down the team or they feel pushed by a coach. This is one reason why most U.S. states have rules about when kids and teens can start playing sports again after a concussion. These rules are there to protect players so they're not pushed into getting back in the game too soon — when the risk of second-impact syndrome is high.

There are a number of ways doctors can tell if someone is ready to return to play. A doctor will consider you healed when:

* the symptoms of concussion are gone
* you regain all of your memory and concentration
* you don't have symptoms after jogging, sprinting, sit-ups, or push-ups

Once the doctor tells you it's OK to start playing sports again, ease back into things. Stop playing right away if any symptoms return (that second-impact syndrome thing again). With the right diagnosis and treatment, most teens with concussions recover within a week or two without lasting health problems.

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