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## Concussion in sport

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### Introduction

Many people engage in sports as a part of their lifestyle, either professionally or recreationally. It is always important to be aware of the risk of injury in sports, one of which can be concussion. More importantly, people who engage in sports should be clear on what to do in the event that a concussion is experienced.

This factsheet aims to offer information on what a concussion is, how to identify it and what to do if you or someone you know experiences a sports-related concussion.

### What is a concussion?

Concussion, often also referred to as a minor head injury or minor traumatic brain injury (mTBI) is a temporary disturbance in the brain's functioning as a result of a blow to the head. This can be from an object such as a ball striking the head, or from two players knocking into one another. The impact causes the brain to shake around in the skull, which can cause both immediate and long-term symptoms. These are discussed in more detail below.

### What are the symptoms of concussion?

In some cases, an individual may lose consciousness as a result of the head injury. However, only around 10% of reported concussions involve a loss of consciousness, so it is important to not solely rely on this as an indicator.

Other key signs of concussion to look out for include:

- Dizziness
- Unsteadiness or imbalance
- Confusion
- Sensitivity to light
- Nausea
- Slurred speech
- Blurred or distorted vision
- Inability to process information

These symptoms can take place immediately following an impact to the head, or develop



hours, days or weeks later. They are normal symptoms to experience and in most cases will improve by themselves within a couple of weeks. However, if any of the symptoms become problematic or persist, the concussed individual might wish to speak to their GP about any further assessment that may be necessary.

In the majority of cases, there will be no long-term damage caused by a concussion if treated appropriately with medical assessment and rest. Occasionally, however, complications can arise from seemingly minor blows to the head, which is why it is vital that people seek medical attention following a concussion.

**The following symptoms necessitate an immediate visit to A&E, as they could be indicative of a more serious injury:**

- **Loss of consciousness**
- **Deafness in one or both ears that was not present before**
- **Loss of balance or problems with walking**
- **Weakness in one or both arms or legs**
- **Any vomiting**
- **Clear fluid coming out of ears or nose**
- **Drowsiness when you would normally be wide awake**
- **Increased disorientation**
- **Problems with understanding or speaking**
- **Blurred or double vision**
- **Inability to be woken**
- **Bleeding from one or both ears**
- **Any fits (collapsing or passing out suddenly)**
- **Severe headache not relieved by painkillers such as paracetamol**

## How to spot a sports-related concussion

Even a seemingly minor blow to the head can leave a person concussed. However, someone who has experienced a concussion might not be aware of it, or they might not admit to it for fear of not being able to play on. The symptoms of concussion are often hidden, and might not be obvious. In addition, concussion can be an evolving condition with the presentation of symptoms often delayed. It is therefore important for fellow participants, coaches, official and spectators to look out for any signs of concussion (see section *What are the symptoms of concussion?*)

If a concussion is suspected, the individual should immediately stop participating and medical attention should be sought. If a concussion is ignored and the individual continues



to participate while concussed, they could be putting their short and long-term health at risk as a secondary blow to the head could exacerbate the initial injury.

## What to do if concussion is suspected

The most important and immediate advice to follow if someone experiences a sports-related concussion is ***if in doubt, sit it out***. If there is any doubt of whether the person with the impact to the head is experiencing concussion, it is important that they sit out rather than immediately returning to the sport. They should not be left alone at any point following for several hours after the injury and medical attention should be sought as soon as possible.

Identifying concussion (particularly in non-medical settings such as sports fields) is notoriously difficult. Only suitably qualified medical professionals should attempt to diagnose concussion and even then a cautious approach should always be taken.

There are some sideline diagnostic tools in circulation, such as the Sports Concussion Assessment Tool (SCAT3). However, it is important to make clear that these should only be used by medical professionals.

In the weeks that follow a concussion taking place, it is important to get as much rest as possible. This is because the brain needs time to recover from the injury, and straining it can prolong the time it takes to make a recovery.

You can use the following example to understand how important rest is after a concussion, or any kind of head injury:

*If someone sprains their wrist, they will need to rest it for a certain amount of time. This would involve not using the wrist for any strenuous tasks. Any extra strain and the wrist will take longer to heal. This is the same with the brain; it needs time to rest after an injury so that it can heal, and extra work (such as strenuous thinking, prolonged concentration, or excessive sensory stimulation) can hinder the recovery process.*

Further suggestions of what to do in the weeks that follow a concussion are as follows:

- DO stay within reach of a telephone and have medical numbers at hand if you need them
- DO have plenty of rest and avoid stressful situations
- DO share this information with a friend or a family member who can keep an eye on your condition
- DO take painkillers such as paracetamol for headaches
- DON'T stay at home alone for 48 hours after the injury has taken place



# factsheet

- DON'T drink alcohol until you feel better
- DON'T take aspirin or sleeping tablets without consulting a doctor
- DON'T play contact sports for at least three weeks without consulting your doctor
- DON'T return to driving until you feel you have recovered. If in doubt, consult your doctor.

If you are struggling with any of the ongoing effects of concussion, you might wish to consider consulting your doctor as they might be able to recommend things such as medication or therapies that can help. You can also show your doctor, sports coach or employer this factsheet, or any of the other information resources that Headway offer at [www.headway.org.uk/information-library](http://www.headway.org.uk/information-library).

To find out more about concussion and Headway's Concussion Aware campaign, visit [www.headway.org.uk/get-involved/campaigns/concussion-aware](http://www.headway.org.uk/get-involved/campaigns/concussion-aware).

**To discuss any issues raised in this factsheet, or to find details of our local groups and branches, please contact the Headway helpline free of charge on 0808 800 2244 (Monday - Friday, 9am-5pm) or by email at [helpline@headway.org.uk](mailto:helpline@headway.org.uk).**

You can also find more information and contact details of groups and branches on our website at [www.headway.org.uk/supporting-you](http://www.headway.org.uk/supporting-you).

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