

## Concussions <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

What are the symptoms of a concussion? What happens if you have a concussion and it goes untreated?

### Answer

Dear Reader,

Our brains are surrounded and cushioned by special fluid designed to protect the brain from the jarring movements of everyday life. However, a strong enough blow to the head can injure the brain, causing a concussion. People often get concussions while playing sports (like football, boxing, ice hockey, biking, skiing, and so on) or doing other recreational activities, but being involved in car crashes and falls are also common causes. Immediate signs and symptoms of a concussion may include:

- Confusion or problems concentrating
- Memory loss (Usually the events immediately preceding and those occurring immediately after the incident causing the concussion are not remembered, though the memory loss can span for minutes or longer.)
- Loss of consciousness
- Headache
- Slurred speech
- Blurred vision or dizziness
- Ringing in ears
- Nausea or vomiting
- Unequal pupil size
- Unusual eye movements
- Convulsions

The signs and symptoms of a concussion may not be obvious, so it's helpful to be familiar with them. Also, some symptoms may not appear until well after the collision (making it harder to recognize the injury). The effects of a concussion can last a week or longer. Some of the delayed signs and symptoms of a concussion may include:

- Irritability, anxiety, personality changes, or depression
- Problems with remembering, concentration, attention, etc.
- Problems sleeping
- Increased sensitivity to light and sound
- Difficulty with walking normally or with coordination

While *most* concussions do get better on their own, some blows to the head can cause more serious injury. Anyone who experiences the following symptoms after a head injury should see her/his health care provider as soon as possible:

- Prolonged or worsened headache or dizziness
- Vision disturbances
- Confusion
- Changes in speech or behavior
- Seizures
- Nausea or repeated vomiting
- Loss of consciousness that last for more than 30 seconds
- Impaired balance and coordination

Anyone who has had a concussion in the past is more susceptible to getting another concussion — even from a less forceful head injury. It's especially important to get the OK from a health care provider before jumping back into an activity where a second head bump could occur. If someone with a concussion too hastily returns to contact sports or activities, a second concussion can result in second impact syndrome — a potentially fatal condition. Second impact syndrome is when another blow to the head (even a minor one) results in the brain losing its ability to control its own blood flow, which may result in rapid and potentially fatal brain swelling.

If you're recovering at home from a mild concussion, make getting plenty of rest a priority. You may want to ice your head where the contact occurred, and you can also take over-the-counter pain relievers like acetaminophen. Avoid ibuprofen or aspirin as they may increase the risk of bleeding. Protect your head by not participating in any vigorous or contact activities or ones that require a lot of mental concentration until your health care provider gives you the A-OK.

The take home message here is that concussions should not be taken lightly. Proper medical care (if required) and enough rest are essential for recovery. If you think there's a chance that you've had a concussion, schedule a visit with your health care provider right away. And remember; be careful with your head because it's the only one you've got!

Alice!

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