

Concussions In Young Athletes

What athletes, coaches, and parents on the sidelines should know

What is a concussion?

Concussion, from the Latin verb “concutere” (to shake violently) is a traumatically induced alteration in mental status that may or may not involve loss of consciousness. Common symptoms include:

- Confusion
- Dizziness
- Headache
- Unsteadiness
- Nausea
- Feeling “in a fog”

Who gets a concussion?

Any athlete can suffer a concussion, but they are most common in high and medium contact sports such as football, soccer, lacrosse, and basketball. It has been estimated that 1.2 million sports-related concussions occur every year. Athletes who are not expecting a sudden impact suffer most concussions due to the sudden twist of the head. The most common two mechanisms of injury for concussion are getting hit on the side of the head or hitting the back of the head on the ground.

Are concussions in kids and concussions in adults the same?

No! Almost every sports injury—a fracture, a sprain, a bruise—all heal faster in kids than in adults. Concussions are different. Many studies have shown concussion healing rates are slower in kids than in adults. Furthermore, the brain is at greater risk from suffering a second, more serious injury if the first concussion isn't healed. It's very important to make sure young athletes have no symptoms of headache, dizziness, or light sensitivity for at least a week before heading back on to the field. It's best to check with their doctor before resuming sports after a concussion.

How do you treat someone who gets a concussion?

If an athlete is suspected to have suffered a concussion, the first and most important thing is to get them off of the field and away from further contact. The risk of a second, more serious concussion is greatly increased when someone is still symptomatic from a first concussion. Concussions are serious injuries, and return to activity afterwards is an important consideration. Newer computerized testing procedures have made return to activity more data driven, but these aren't necessary for everyone. The key is to make sure there are no symptoms.

What is the prognosis for an athlete who has sustained a concussion?

Many athletes who suffer mild concussions will return to normal mental status and be able to return to play soon after injury, provided that all symptoms have ceased. Almost all concussions will heal over time. The main mistake that athletes, coaches, and parents make is trying to return the brain to contact before it's ready. Remember that everyone heals this injury at a different rate, so listen to your own body!

How can head trauma be avoided?

Be smart. Appropriate protective gear, especially helmets, should be worn at all times during play. Helmets should be fitted for each individual athlete and discarded if worn out. Coaches and athletes should maintain appropriate conditioning for participation in sports, especially focusing on the neck muscles, which when strengthened will increase the amount of force needed to cause a concussion. Better skill development, especially in soccer where heading technique is key, can also reduce the frequency of concussion.

Keep it safe, stay on the field!

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