

# Concussions

## A Guide to Understanding Your Recovery

For Adults



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## About concussions

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### Fast facts:

- A concussion is a mild injury to the brain. It can happen after a hard blow or jolt to the head or body.
- You can get a concussion with or without blacking out (losing consciousness).
- It is common to feel dazed or confused, or have trouble remembering events around the time of the injury (amnesia).
- Most people with concussions completely recover.
- People recover better when they understand their injury and learn how to manage the effects of the injury.
- All concussions should be taken seriously.

Common causes of concussions are motor vehicle accidents, falls, sports injuries, or assaults. You might hear people say, “I had my bell rung” or “I saw stars”. This suggests they might have had a concussion.

We also call concussions “mild traumatic brain injuries”.

Concussions in general are described as “mild injuries”. This is because they are not usually life threatening and, in most cases, there are no lasting effects.

Recovery varies from person to person. Most effects of the injury go away within 2 to 4 weeks. Recovery might be slower for older adults, people who have had concussions in the past, people who have had depression or anxiety in the past, or people who have chronic pain.

It might take more time to recover when the concussion involves more serious injuries, such as broken skull bones or bruising to the brain.

## When to get help

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The Concussion Awareness Training Tool (CATT) online gives you detailed instructions for what to do after a concussion.

Concussion Awareness Training Tool  
[cattonline.com](http://cattonline.com)

Right after an event that could cause a concussion, both of these things should happen:

- You should be removed from the activity.
- A doctor or nurse practitioner should check you.  
This can be done at an emergency department, clinic, or doctor's office.

The doctor or nurse practitioner should give you instructions to follow at home. They might ask that you have someone stay with you for the next 24 to 48 hours. They check your skin colour, your breathing, as well as how you are sleeping.

If any of these “red flags”\* appear within the first few days, go to the nearest Emergency Department or call 9-1-1:



- neck pain or tenderness
- double vision
- weakness, tingling, or burning in the arms or legs
- severe headache or a headache that gets worse
- seizure or convulsion
- blacking out (lose consciousness)
- getting more and more drowsy
- throwing up (vomiting)
- not able to recognize people or places
- getting restless, agitated, or hostile

\*Adapted from “Overview: What is a concussion?” from [cattonline.com/overview-what-is-a-concussion/](http://cattonline.com/overview-what-is-a-concussion/)

## Common signs of concussion

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You can experience a number of different things after a concussion (see table below). Every person is different.

Although troublesome, these effects are common and should improve with time. They **do not** usually mean permanent brain damage or medical complications. They usually go away without special treatment.

Even if you think the injury is minor, you should know about the signs of a concussion.

### Common signs of concussion

Physical	Cognitive	Emotional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Headache</li> <li>• Dizziness or light-headedness</li> <li>• Nausea</li> <li>• Poor Balance</li> <li>• Feeling tired or sluggish</li> <li>• Changes in sleep pattern</li> <li>• Changes in vision</li> <li>• Sensitivity to light or noise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less able to concentrate</li> <li>• Memory problems</li> <li>• Trouble expressing thoughts</li> <li>• Trouble finding the right words</li> <li>• Feeling mentally foggy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Irritable or grumpy</li> <li>• Anxious</li> <li>• Depressed</li> <li>• Feeling more emotional</li> </ul>

## Getting better

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The effects of a concussion usually go away with time. Still, it is important to listen to your body when you are first injured. In the first 24 to 48 hours after injury, resting will help your recovery. After that, gradually getting back to your daily activities is best.

As you continue to improve, you should return to your usual activities a little at a time, including both mental and physical activities. Taking part in your usual daily activities can also help build your stamina for returning to work or school.

While recovering, take extra care to keep from having another concussion. Another injury at this time can make the effects worse and make your recovery longer.

Here are actions you can take to help you get better.

### Getting rest and sleep

In the early stages (the first 7 to 10 days) of your recovery, take it easy. It is common to feel tired and have less energy than usual. Tiredness can make many of your signs worse. It can also cause problems with your mood and your thinking. Rest and get enough sleep.



Resting includes not only limiting your physical activities (for example, limiting household chores or exercise) but also your mental activities (for example, limiting how much you read, watch television, or play video games).

Sleeping well is also important to your recovery. If you have trouble getting a good night's sleep, talk to your doctor.

## Returning to your daily routine



Ease back into your routine gradually and pace yourself by resting during and between activities. Try not to go back to all of your usual activities right away, at the same pace as you did before your injury, including work or school. Do not push yourself beyond your limit.

At the beginning, people often need to plan to return to work or school only a few hours each day. This is particularly important if you are a full-time worker or student. You might benefit from having a healthcare professional, such as an occupational therapist, help you with planning your gradual return to work or school.

## Returning to driving



For at least the first 24 hours after your injury, **do not** drive or operate any motorized vehicle. Concussions can affect your ability to concentrate and react quickly.

Contact your doctor if you are concerned about your ability to drive, particularly if you are concerned about difficulties with vision, slowness of thinking, slowed reaction time, reduced attention, or poor judgment.

Return to driving only when you feel confident and safe to do so. When you return to driving, it might be helpful to start with short distances on familiar routes when there is less traffic.

## Avoiding alcohol and drugs



It is safest to not drink alcohol or use recreational drugs while you are recovering from a concussion. Alcohol and/or drugs might slow your recovery and could place you at risk of further injury.

## Managing headaches

Headaches are one of the most common effects people have after a concussion. Headaches can be from strain to muscles, nerves, joints, or bones of the head or neck. They can also be from the stress of having an injury (see page 9). Fortunately, as with other concussion effects, headaches usually go away with time.



Take steps to manage your headache pain. This can mean using more than one way to treat the headaches, such as taking medicines, changes in lifestyle, and/or active rehabilitation.

- **Medication.** This is usually the first choice for headaches and can be very effective. Review the medicines you use with your family doctor regularly, including any prescription and non-prescription medicines.
- **Lifestyle changes.** Changing aspects of your life can help manage the headaches. Examples of changes: making sure you get enough sleep and rest, pacing your activities, drinking enough fluids, eating regularly, and learning how to manage your stress.
- **Active rehabilitation.** Other treatments, such as physiotherapy or massage, might help relieve headaches as well.

If you have trouble managing your headaches, talk with your doctor.

## Taking medicines

Only take medicines approved by your doctor.



## Coping with dizziness

There can be a number of causes of dizziness after such as:



- changes in vision
- injury to the inner ear
- injury to the neck
- side effects of certain medicines
- feeling anxious

The dizziness usually settles down within the first 3 to 4 weeks after the injury. While you have this problem, make sure you take steps to keep from hitting your head again or falling.

Tips to help you do things safely:

- Slow down. Take your time when moving or getting up. Try not to move suddenly.
- Identify what ways you move that make you feel dizzy. Move with care.
- Use railings to go up and down stairs.
- Keep items within reach.
- Do not climb ladders or work from heights.

Tell your doctor about your dizziness or problems with balance. Your doctor might want to look into possible causes and suggest you see a specialist or have special therapy (such as vestibular rehabilitation).

Dizziness can affect safety on the job. Ask your doctor if you need to make any changes to your work duties.

## Difficulties with thinking

Following a concussion, you might have difficulty thinking clearly, such as trouble concentrating, remembering things, or thinking quickly. This can slow you down and be frustrating. These problems usually go away with time. During this time, try different ways to reduce how it affects your life.

Ways to help you cope with difficulty thinking:

- Reduce distractions in your environment.  
For example, turn off the television when you are talking on the phone.
- Complete one task at a time.  
Try not to do too many things at once.
- Break large tasks into smaller steps.
- Give yourself more time than usual to complete tasks.
- Work in a quiet area whenever possible.
- Use a calendar or agenda to help you remember appointments and important information.
- Keep important items in the same place.
- Keep a pen and paper handy to write things down.
- Make lists for yourself.
- Plan your activities to help you prepare for the day.
- Plan for rest breaks during the day.

## Managing mood changes and stress



It is common to feel anxious, irritable, or sad after a concussion. This can be from the injury itself or how the injury has affected your life. Notice major changes in your mood.

Stress is common after any injury. Injury can affect both your lifestyle and routine. Worrying about the injury and its effect on you can add to your stress.

Mood changes and stress can slow your recovery.

Tips to help improve your mood and reduce your daily stress:

- Make sure you are getting enough sleep.
- Eat healthy and nutritious food.
- Go for a gentle walk for 10 to 15 minutes each day (see page 10). If you are not sure what you can do, check with your doctor.
- Return to your daily activities with rests in between.
- Plan your daily tasks. Be realistic in what you can do in a day.
- Include activities you find relaxing and enjoyable into your day.
- Stay connected with family and friends.
- Remind yourself often that this is temporary and you will recover.

Speak to your doctor if your mood is limiting your recovery. Help is available through counselling.

## Exercising and taking part in sports

For the first few days after your concussion, it is best to limit any activity or exercise that increases your heart rate. Gentle exercise each day will help you recover. It can help reduce any stress as well.



Before starting any exercise, check with your doctor.

This is usually how you would return to exercise:

1. Begin with 10 to 15 minutes of light exercise, like walking or stationary cycling, after 24 to 48 hours.
2. Slowly increase how often you exercise (frequency), as long as you feel okay doing this.
3. Slowly increase how long you exercise (duration), as long as you feel okay doing this.
4. Slowly increase how hard you exercise (intensity), as long as you feel okay doing this.

Anytime you feel worse after exercising, you likely need to reduce how long you exercise, how hard you exercise, or both.

There are specific guidelines that outline the steps for returning to sports. Always talk with your doctor before returning to high intensity training and sport.

Return to Sport tool

[cattonline.com/returning-to-sport/](https://cattonline.com/returning-to-sport/)



## Follow-up

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See your family doctor in the next few weeks if the effects of the injury are not getting better. Your doctor might refer you to a specialist doctor or other healthcare professional.

Examples of specialist doctors: neurologist, physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist, ophthalmologist, ear-nose-throat specialist, psychiatrist

Examples of healthcare professionals: vestibular therapist, occupational therapist, physiotherapist, psychologist, counsellor

The effects of the concussion and related problems can certainly affect your day-to-day functioning. However, it is important to remember that these effects are usually temporary and most people who have a concussion completely recover.

If you live within the Fraser Health area (Burnaby to Hope) and want more information, please contact our Concussion Services.

If you live outside our area, please contact your local health authority.



## Online concussion resources

You can find more information about concussions at these websites:

### Fraser Health Concussion Services

[fraserhealth.ca/concussion](https://fraserhealth.ca/concussion)

QR Code\*



### Vancouver Coastal Health *My Guide to Concussions*

[concussion.vch.ca](https://concussion.vch.ca) (over 18 years of age)



### Vancouver Coastal Health *My Guide to Concussions (Teen Edition)*

[teenconcussion.vch.ca](https://teenconcussion.vch.ca) (under 18 years of age)



### Concussion Awareness Training Tool (CATT)

[cattonline.com](https://cattonline.com)



\*A QR code (short for 'quick response' code) is a type of barcode that you scan with your smart device's camera. Once scanned, it takes you to that web page.

**Concussion Services**  
**604 -514-7431**

[www.fraserhealth.ca](http://www.fraserhealth.ca)

This information does not replace the advice given to you by your healthcare provider.

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