



Concussions

WHAT IS A CONCUSSION?

A concussion is an injury to the brain. It is usually caused by a head injury, but can also be caused by a blow to the body. Concussions can, and often do, occur without a loss of consciousness. Getting a “ding”, or “having your bell rung” can be a concussion. Although the most common sports associated with concussions are football, lacrosse, and soccer, concussions can occur during any activity.

Signs and symptoms of a concussion can occur right after the injury, or can begin hours or even days later. All head injuries, whether caused by sports or by other activities or accidents, can result in a concussion. A person with a concussion can feel confused, woozy, nauseated, dizzy, irritable, or have headaches. There can be sensitivity to light or noise, problems with focus, a dazed feeling, or just “not feeling right”. Concussions cause functional or chemical problems within the brain, not structural problems. For this reason, CT scans or MRIs do not usually show anything and are usually not necessary. Red flags for a more serious injury include significant scalp or head swelling, vomiting, behavioral changes, and lethargy.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF A CONCUSSION IS SUSPECTED?

A concussion can be a very serious injury. Athletes should be immediately removed from play and allowed to rest. If there is prolonged loss of consciousness, prolonged confusion, seizure activity or lethargy, the injured person should immediately be seen in an emergency room. If a more serious injury is not suspected, then someone with a possible, mild concussion should be seen by a doctor within a day. An athlete with any concussion should never be allowed to return to play until examined by a doctor. In fact, California Assembly Bill 25 recently went into effect, requiring – for school sports – that a player suspected of having a concussion must be removed from play and not allowed to return without written clearance from a licensed health care provider.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER A CONCUSSION?

Symptoms from a concussion can last for minutes to months. Most concussion symptoms resolve within a few weeks with rest. There are no medications that will speed recovery. Physical or mental exertion can make concussion symptoms worse (yes, even homework). Television, video games, and texting can also make symptoms worse. Having one concussion makes an athlete more likely to have another concussion in the future with an even smaller injury. Athletes should never participate in sports while they still have symptoms of a concussion. An athlete who still has headaches or other symptoms is at risk for catastrophic brain injury if they receive another concussion before completely recovering. The problem is, many athletes minimize or disregard these symptoms in an attempt to get back on the field. Computerized neuropsychological testing can help to monitor recovery.

HOW DO WE PREVENT CONCUSSIONS?

Awareness of concussions is the most important first step. Everyone – from athletes to coaches to parents – should know the signs and symptoms of a concussion. Proper technique in high-risk sports like football is critical. Wearing properly-fitting helmets and gear is also imperative. Despite many claims, there are no special helmets or devices that have been proven to decrease the risks of head injury. Identifying risky play and teaching about concussions are our most important interventions.