

Caring for Your Child After a Concussion

Your child has been diagnosed with a concussion. A concussion temporarily changes how the brain works. Follow these instructions to keep your child safe and help him or her get better.

What are the common symptoms of a concussion?

Physical symptoms

- headache
- feeling sick to your stomach
- throwing up
- dizziness
- balance problems
- having trouble seeing or focusing
- getting tired easily
- sensitivity to light or noise
- numbness.

Mental symptoms

- feeling “foggy”
- feeling slowed down
- having a hard time remembering things
- having a hard time concentrating.

Sleep symptoms

- feeling drowsy
- sleeping less or more than usual
- having a hard time falling asleep.

Mood symptoms

- being easily bothered
- feeling sadness
- feeling more emotional than usual
- feeling nervous.

Do’s and don’ts

It is okay for your child to:

- take acetaminophen (Tylenol), as needed, for headache. Do not take ibuprofen (Motrin or Advil).
- use an ice pack on the head or neck
- go to sleep
- rest.

There is no need to make your child stay in bed or wake up every hour.

Do not let your child:

- drive while having symptoms
- exercise or lift heavy weights
- drink alcohol
- participate in sports or high risk activities.

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How do I help my child return to normal, daily activities?

Your child will need help from you, teachers, and coaches to help manage his or her activity level.

Do not let your child participate in:

- **physical and mental activities** that take a lot of time and concentration, such as homework, job-related work, and extended video game playing. These activities make symptoms worse and make recovery longer.
- **any high-risk activities** that may result in another head injury, until your child is checked and cleared by a doctor. High-risk activities include all sports, physical education class, and riding an all-terrain vehicle (ATV) or bike.

Make sure your child gets good sleep at night. Let him or her take naps, if needed. Do not let your child stay up late or have sleepovers until symptoms are gone.

What about going back to school?

If your child cannot concentrate for more than 30 to 45 minutes, you may need to keep him or her at home until symptoms improve. When your child is well enough to go back to school, let your child's teachers, school nurse, school counselor, and administrators know about your child's injury and symptoms. Teachers and school administrators can help your child return to school safely by:

- giving at least one rest break per day
- reducing workload and being flexible with due dates
- keeping your child out of noisy areas
- holding off giving standardized tests.

As symptoms improve, these adjustments can be removed.

School personnel should watch for signs of worsening symptoms, especially:

- increased problems paying attention, remembering, or learning new information
- needing a longer time to complete a task
- increased irritability
- unable to cope with stress.

What about returning to sports?

Tennessee Youth Concussion Law states that a child with a concussion may not return to any physical activities or sports until he or she is cleared by a licensed health care provider. Because symptoms may last for several days and sometimes more symptoms show up over time, your child will not be cleared to return to activity by the emergency room doctor.

You must follow up with your child's primary doctor or specialist for clearance to return to full activity. Until cleared to return to activity, your child cannot participate in physical education class, practices, or games.

- Tell the physical education teacher and all coaches of the injury and symptoms.
- Your child may feel frustrated, sad, and even angry because he or she cannot return to sports or recreation right away.
- After a head injury, it is important to wait for a full recovery before going back to sports. This will lower the chances of getting hurt again. It is better to miss one game than the whole season.

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What is the stairstep program to return to sports?

When your child's symptoms are gone and his or her doctor gives the okay to return to activity, your child may **slowly** increase activity following these steps:

1. no activity and rest
2. light aerobic activity (walking, gentle swimming, gentle stretching exercises)
3. heavier aerobic activity (running, cycling, or other ways to increase heart rate)
4. sport-specific training conditioning drills
5. non-contact practice drills
6. full-contact drills with no restrictions
7. game play.

Do not let your child go to the next step until his or her body is ready. If symptoms return with a new step, your child should start back at Step 1 and follow-up with the doctor. It is very important to report any concussion symptoms. Having symptoms means your child's brain has not fully healed.

When should we follow-up with the doctor?

Contact your child's primary doctor for a follow-up appointment in 1 to 2 weeks.

If your child is an athlete, or the symptoms last longer than 1 to 2 weeks, ask your child's doctor if your child should see a specialist in the Vanderbilt Sports Concussion Clinic.

- For a sports-related concussion follow-up, call the Vanderbilt Sports Concussion Clinic at (615) 875-8722.
- For a non-sports-related concussion follow-up, call the Pediatric Neurosurgery Clinic at (615) 322-6875.

What is Project Brain?

Project BRAIN is a program that supports students with traumatic brain injury (TBI) by training their school personnel, families, and health professionals. The overall goal of Project BRAIN is to improve education for children with brain injuries in Tennessee. Project BRAIN works throughout a student's care: from hospital to home to school. Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt is one of three children's hospitals in Tennessee who have a staff member supported by Project BRAIN to help families of injured children. To learn more call the Tennessee Disability Coalition at (615) 383-9442 or email: coalition@tndisability.org.

Call your child's primary care provider or return to the nearest emergency department right away if:

- your child's headaches get worse
- your child has a seizure
- your child has an unusual change in behavior
- your child cannot stop throwing up
- your child is lethargic (so tired you cannot wake him or her up)
- your child's speech is slurred
- your child is very irritable or annoyed
- your child cannot recognize people or places
- your child is more and more confused
- your child is not responding like normal
- your child has neck pain
- your child's arms or legs are weak or numb.

Follow these care instructions carefully. If your child has problems that we did not list or you have any other concerns, call your child's primary doctor right away.