

Returning to Play After Concussion

Why is taking care of a concussion so important?

A brain injury is as important to you as a broken bone or a major surgery. Recovering takes planning and follow-through. When you're recovering from a concussion, it's very important to let your brain heal from this injury. The best way to do this is to get plenty of mental and physical rest. Follow these instructions until your symptoms of concussion are completely gone. Then you can begin to slowly return to the mental and physical activities described below.

Symptoms of concussion

- headache
- fogginess
- trouble concentrating
- light or noise sensitivity
- trouble sleeping
- mood swings.

Step 1. How to get plenty of mental and physical rest

Make time for activities that rest your brain:

- listening to quiet music
- watching movies or TV (not 3-D)

- light reading
- meditation
- sleep.

Avoid activities that strain your brain:

- playing video games
- lots of work on a computer
- detailed reading
- mind-challenging games
- taking tests
- lots of text messaging
- long phone calls.

Make time for activities that are slow and easy:

- gentle stretching exercises
- slow, relaxed walks
- moving around slowly in a swimming pool, but no diving or swimming laps.

Avoid activities that raise your heart rate and blood pressure:

- weight lifting
- running and jogging
- work
- housework
- yard work
- sex.

(continued)

Step 1. How do I get plenty of mental and physical rest?

Work your way up to slow, easy activities as long as they don't cause symptoms. Here's how:

- gentle stretching exercises
- slow, relaxing walks
- gentle swimming or treading water in a pool, but no diving or swimming laps.

What is full healing?

It's very important to go easy at first. If you're a student, go to just a few classes for a few days before returning for a whole day. If you work, try half-days first.

Watch your symptoms closely. If they return, back off and take it easy. Remember that each person heals in a different way. If you rush back to your normal activity too soon, you will delay full healing. It will take longer for your symptoms of concussion to be completely gone.

How do I control pain?

- If your doctor approves, you may take acetaminophen (Tylenol, etc.) for headache pain.
- Do not take aspirin, ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, etc.) or any over-the-counter medicines that contain non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs for 48 hours after a head injury. These medicines can increase the risk of bleeding in your brain.

- Never use pain medicines to cover up symptoms so you can get back to playing sports. This can make brain problems worse over time. It can make you unable to play.
- You must take no pain medicine for 24 hours before you begin the stairstep program to return to sports.

What is the Stairstep Program for athletes in competitive sports?

If you play competitive sports, you may return for rehab when your symptoms have cleared completely. Begin with the Stairstep Program.

Stairstep program:

1. Light aerobic activity means walking, gentle swimming, gentle stretching exercises.
2. Heavier aerobic activity means running, cycling, other ways to increase your heart rate.
3. Sport-specific conditioning drills
4. Non-contact practice drills
5. Full practice without restrictions

You must go through this program before you can play in a game. It's very important to report any concussion symptoms as you recover. Having symptoms means your brain has not fully healed. Do not go to the next step until your body is ready.

More information:

If you have questions or need more information, please call the Vanderbilt Sports Concussion Center at (615) 875-VSCC (8722) or visit our website at www.vanderbiltsportsconcussion.com