

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

HEAD INJURIES**WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?**

Not all head injuries are concussions. A concussion occurs when a blow to the head causes injury and decreased blood flow to the brain. Shaking, stretching, bruising, or swelling of brain tissue or nerve fibers can lead to a variety of symptoms that can last days to weeks or longer.

The most common symptoms are headache and dizziness. Other symptoms can include:

- Nausea or vomiting
- Trouble concentrating
- Memory loss
- Fatigue, drowsiness
- Confusion
- Weakness
- Visual changes
- Increased irritability, emotional changes
- Seizures
- Loss of consciousness

HOW WILL I BE EVALUATED?

Your healthcare provider will perform a physical exam based on your symptoms and mechanism of injury. A comprehensive neurologic exam that includes a brief memory test will be completed. In certain cases, you may be referred to the emergency room for neck X-rays and/or a computed tomography (CT) scan of the head.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?

In most cases, symptoms resolve with **REST** and conservative measures. **Getting plenty of physical and mental rest is the key to recovery.** Most patients recover within 3 weeks.

❖ **Basic Do's & Don't's**

- **DO** use an ice pack on the injury 20 minutes out of every hour as needed.
- **DO** take acetaminophen (Tylenol) if needed for pain.
- **DO** continue to take any medications you were on before the head injury (such as ADHD prescriptions, antidepressants, etc.) except...
- **DO NOT** use non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin), naproxen (Aleve), aspirin, or Excedrin. These medications may decrease the ability of blood to clot if you are bleeding.
- **DO NOT** use sleep aids, narcotic medications, or other sedatives.
- **DO NOT** drink alcohol. Alcohol is known to worsen symptoms.
- **DO NOT** use cannabis or other illegal substances.
- **DO NOT** drive until you are cleared by your medical provider.

❖ **Complete physical and mental rest is recommended for the first 1-3 days after the head injury.**

- You do not need to stay in bed, but physical activity should be light. Avoid any activities that worsen symptoms.
- Sleep when you need to. You do not need to be awakened while you are sleeping. However, it is ideal to have someone watch you for the first 8-12 hours after a head injury. If you exhibit any of the warning signs listed on the next page, seek emergency care immediately.
- Avoid classes, studying, exams, computer use, etc. for the first 1-3 days to decrease stress on the brain.

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- ❖ **After the first 2-3 days, you can gradually return to normal activities as symptoms improve.**
 - Gradually resume typical daily physical activities. Avoid activities that cause or worsen symptoms.
 - Do not start exercising without consulting your medical provider first.
 - You will be allowed to increase exercise in a step-wise fashion only if you are symptom-free and remain symptom-free at each stage of advancement.
 - You cannot return to unrestricted sports participation until you have been cleared by your medical provider.
 - Limit activities that require a lot of concentration.
 - Avoid sustained computer use, reading, texting, watching TV/videos, playing video games, etc.
 - Start with 5-15 minutes at a time, stopping the activity if symptoms occur. Gradually increase the time you spend in the activity if you remain symptom free.

- ❖ **It is very important to let your brain heal completely after a concussion.** Getting another concussion before your brain has healed may lead to serious brain problems.

Repeat concussions that occur after the brain has healed can also lead to cumulative brain injury.

IS FOLLOW-UP NEEDED?

Yes, close follow-up with your medical provider is important, even if you feel you are recovering.

- Follow-up is especially important if symptoms persist or if new symptoms develop. You may be referred to a specialist if symptoms last longer than expected.
- If symptoms are significantly affecting your ability to function and keep up with classes, you may choose to **request formal academic accommodations from the office of Student Accessibility and Educational Opportunity** (saeo.vcu.edu or 804-828-2253), located in the Student Commons, Suite 018, Monday-Friday, 8am-5pm.

SEEK URGENT MEDICAL CARE IF YOU HAVE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING:

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| ▪ Unusual drowsiness, confusion | ▪ Sudden or progressive impairment of vision |
| ▪ Unusual headache | ▪ Oozing blood or fluid from the ears or nose |
| ▪ Unusual behavior | ▪ Trouble using your arms or legs |
| ▪ Difficulty talking | ▪ Uncontrolled twitching or convulsions |
| ▪ Persistent vomiting | |
| ▪ Unequal pupil sizes | |

If any of the above symptoms are present, go to an emergency room immediately, as these symptoms may indicate bleeding inside the head.

If you are not sure whether you need to go to the ER, you may call Student Health. A medical provider is available by phone (804-828-8828) after hours or on holidays in case of emergencies.

RECOMMENDED WEBSITES: www.cdc.gov/headsup, www.mayoclinic.org