Concussion Recovery (Mild Traumatic Brain Injury)
Concussion Recovery

What is a concussion?

• A concussion is caused by a blow or jolt to the head. A concussion is also called a mild traumatic brain injury. You do not need to hit your head directly to have a concussion.

• When you have a concussion, your brain may be shaken inside your skull. This means that your brain may work differently than it did before the injury.

• 9 out of 10 people with a concussion do not lose consciousness. However, many people have memory loss or feel dazed around the time of the injury.

What are your questions?
Please ask. We are here to help you.
How long will my symptoms last?
• Most people get better over time.
• The speed and amount of recovery is different for each person. Symptoms may last for several days, weeks, or months. How fast and how much you recover depends on your symptoms, the part(s) of your brain affected, and how much damage there is.
• Over time, most people find their symptoms go away on their own or are managed well enough that they are able to return to their usual activities.

What symptoms might I have and what kinds of things may help?
• Each brain injury is unique.
• The table on the next page lists common symptoms of a concussion. Things like stress, feeling tired, or having pain can make symptoms worse.
• If your symptoms get worse, it could be a sign that you’re doing too much. It may take you longer to recover if you do too much too soon. It’s a good idea to take your time getting better.
Common symptoms of a concussion

| Physical:            | › headaches  
                          › dizziness  
                          › balance problems  
                          › sensitivity to light and/or noise |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Behaviour or feelings: | › fatigue (tiredness)  
                                    › irritability (grumpiness)  
                                    › changes in mood  
                                    › changes in sleep |
| Cognitive (thinking): | › feeling slowed down  
                                    › feeling in a fog or dazed  
                                    › trouble concentrating  
                                    › trouble remembering |

Read more about these symptoms on the following pages.
Physical symptoms

Headaches

- Headaches are a normal part of the recovery process. If they get more painful and/or happen more often, see your family health care provider.

- It is important to do something about your headaches within the first couple of weeks of your recovery.

- **Things that may help with headaches:**
  - Rest
  - Keep tasks simple and short
  - Do one thing at a time
  - Remove distractions where possible (e.g., noise, TV, people)
  - Drink plenty of fluids; staying hydrated helps in your recovery
  - Talk to your family health care provider about medications that may help
Dizziness

- Dizziness is common after a concussion. It usually goes away within a few months. If your dizziness does not get better within this time, see your family health care provider.

- **Things that may help with dizziness:**
  - Do not move suddenly or change positions quickly. Instead, try to move slowly when rolling over in bed, when sitting or standing up, or when turning your head or body.
  - Drink plenty of fluids; staying hydrated helps in your recovery.

Balance problems

- You may find that you feel clumsy or unsteady on your feet. You may find it harder to walk on uneven ground like grass or gravel than before your concussion.

- **Things that may help with balance problems:**
  - Slow down
  - Clear clutter, including small rugs or other items on the floor
  - Use handrails on stairs
  - Be cautious on uneven surfaces
  - Wear supportive shoes both indoors and outdoors
Sensitivity to light and/or noise

• You may find that light and/or noise bothers you more than it used to.

• Things that may help with light and noise sensitivity:
  › Wear sunglasses, even indoors.
  › Wear a hat with a brim to block out light.
  › Spend less time in harsh lighting conditions (e.g., fluorescent lighting) until your symptoms get better.
  › Use earplugs from time to time to help block noise. You don’t need to use them all the time.
  › Spend less time in noisy places like malls, parties, or grocery stores until your symptoms get better.

Behavioural symptoms or feelings

Fatigue

• Fatigue (feeling tired) is very common after a concussion. You may find you wake up tired, and feel tired even when you are not doing very much. You may only have energy for short periods of time during the day.

• Fatigue is your brain’s way of telling you to slow down and do less. You cannot push through fatigue. The more you do, the worse it will get. Good planning and rest periods can help.
Things that may help with fatigue:

- Know your signs of fatigue (e.g., clumsiness, feeling heavy, headaches, having a hard time thinking, having trouble finding the right words, making mistakes, feeling grumpy).

- Schedule rest periods throughout the day and set alarms to remind you to take rests.

- Pace yourself. Break tasks into smaller parts. Set priorities, and spread the tasks out over time.

- Limit your screen time, including using smartphones, computers, and tablets.

- Do gentle exercise.
  - It is important not to spend most of your day sitting or lying down.
  - Going for short walks at first, and then slowly going for longer walks, is helpful.

- As your symptoms get better, you should be able to do more activities for longer periods of time.
  - Being less active can lead to low energy levels. The less you do, the less you may feel like doing.

- School – You may have to take a short time away from school or lower your course load.
• Work – You may have to work less hours or take time off for a while.

• Some medications can make fatigue worse.
  › Talk to your health care provider if you think your current medications could be making your fatigue worse.

Irritability (grumpiness)
• You may find that you feel on edge more often. You may lose your patience more quickly. Fatigue, sensitivity to light and noise, and other symptoms may make you feel grumpy. Friends and family may say they have to ‘walk on eggshells’ around you or feel like they have to be careful what they say to you.

• Things that may help when you feel grumpy:
  › Set reasonable expectations for yourself. Don’t try to do too much at once.
  › Try to identify situations, thoughts, or feelings that bother you. Things like pain, being rushed, feeling tired, being kept waiting, and being in a busy environment might trigger your irritability.
  › If you start to feel frustrated, take a short break.
  › Focus on your breathing.
› Leave a situation you find irritating.
› Have a plan. Prepare and practice how you will deal with frustrations.
› Since being tired makes irritability worse, try to manage your fatigue by resting often and getting a good night’s sleep.
› Do gentle exercise, such as yoga and walking.

Changes in mood

• You may not feel like yourself. You may feel sad, worried, or anxious. Many factors, like pain, fatigue, and stress, can impact your mood, so it is important that these factors are well-managed.

• Things that may help with your mood:
  › Talk to your friends and family about how you’re feeling.
  › Do gentle exercise.
  › Eat healthy and regular meals.
  › Get enough sleep.
  › If changes in your mood last longer than a couple of weeks, talk to a health care provider about other ways to help your mood.
Changes in sleep

- You may have problems getting to sleep and/or staying asleep.

- **Things that may help with sleep:**
  - Do not have caffeine.
  - Keep the same bedtime routine every day.
  - Start getting ready for sleep at least 30 minutes before bed (e.g., lock the house, put on pyjamas, brush your teeth, turn down the lights).
  - Make your bedroom as comfortable and as quiet as possible.
  - Do things you find relaxing before bedtime.
  - Make sure to exercise earlier in the day.
  - Do not use tablets or smartphones, or watch TV before bedtime.
  - Lower the bedroom temperature.
  - Sleep in a dark room.
  - It can take some time to settle into better sleep patterns. Try to be patient and give yourself time to learn the new habits and routines.

- If you try these suggestions and are still having trouble sleeping, talk with your family health care provider.
Cognitive symptoms

Feeling slowed down
• You may feel like you are always trying to catch up. It may take you more time and effort to get things done.

Feeling in a fog or dazed
• You may feel like you’re in a daze, which makes it harder to think clearly.

Trouble concentrating
• You may find it hard to focus on a task.
• You may get distracted easily or get off topic in conversations.
• You may have more trouble than usual when trying to do more than one thing at a time.

Trouble remembering
• You may have trouble remembering things to do, such as taking your medications or keeping track of appointments.
• You may find that you forget what you have already said or done, or you forget details of what people have said.
• You may misplace things.
Things that may help with cognitive symptoms:

1. Rest
   • Rest does not have to be a nap. You can go somewhere quiet where there are no distractions for a short time.
   
   • **Some suggestions for rest include:**
     › Laying on your couch for 30 minutes with no distractions (e.g., no TV or smartphone).
     › Closing your office door, not answering your phone, and dimming the lights for 15 minutes.
     › Sitting in a quiet corner of the library with your headphones on and listening to soft music for 15 minutes.
   
   • Changing the type of activity you are doing can be restful. For example, moving from a mentally difficult task like paperwork to a physical activity such as walking can be restful.
   
   • Switch between easy tasks and hard ones. It is important that you start to do more activities over time.
2. **Keep things simple**
   - Do one thing at a time.
   - Break tasks into smaller steps.
   - Keep things you use often in one place (e.g., keys, wallet, phone).
   - Put reminders where you are likely to find them (e.g., on the fridge, front door, or mirror).

3. **Plan ahead**
   - Allow more time to get things done. For example, if it took you 10 minutes to get out of the house before your brain injury, give yourself 20 minutes).
   - Work for shorter periods of time and take more regular breaks.
   - If you know that you are going to be in a stimulating place (e.g., noisy or busy), have a plan. Your plan might include:
     - Taking short breaks away from the activity.
     - Using earplugs for short periods to help with noise sensitivity.
     - Using sunglasses to help with light sensitivity.
     - Cutting out distractions where possible, like turning off the radio, TV, or phone; or trying not to have conversations while driving.
› Going to restaurants, running errands, and shopping at times and on days when it is less busy.

4. Use memory aids
   • Make notes and keep them in one place.
   • Use lists to keep you organized and on track.
   • Set alarms for reminders.
   • Post reminders around your home.
   • Use a calendar, daytimer, or smartphone. Having an organized life helps to take the load off memory and learning.

5. Ask for help
   • Do not overload yourself with too many things to do.
   • Ask people to repeat things, especially if there are a lot of details or new information.
   • Ask people to slow down when talking to you.
   • Ask people not to interrupt you during a task.
Frequently asked questions

What about using drugs or alcohol after a concussion?

Using drugs or alcohol after a concussion will:
› Interfere with your recovery.
› Affect you more quickly and have a greater impact on you than it did before your brain injury.
› Affect your judgment and balance, placing you at more risk for another brain injury.

The best way to best recover from your brain injury is to avoid using alcohol or drugs.

When can I drive again?

After a concussion, symptoms such as fatigue, slowed response time, and distractibility will impact your ability to drive safely. You should be symptom-free or have your symptoms under control before you return to driving. Talk with your family health care provider if you have any questions.
What can I do to prevent another concussion?

Do not do activities that put you at risk of another injury. Examples of these types of activities are: drinking alcohol, using drugs, climbing on ladders or stools, playing contact sports, driving motorized vehicles like ATVs, snowmobiles, or motorcycles, skating, skateboarding, skiing, and snowboarding.

Remember:

- Most people make a full recovery.
- Rest is important.
- Slowly become more active.
- Use your symptoms as a guide.
- Ask your family health care provider for help if your symptoms continue for more than a few months.

This pamphlet is just a guide. If you have questions, please talk to your health care provider. We are here to help you.
Questions to ask my family health care provider:
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Learn about other programs and services in your community: call 211 or visit http://ns.211.ca

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