



Dealing with concussions:

Advice for students & student athletes

Be aware

Those who have had a previous concussion are at a higher risk of getting another concussion

If you are within 10 days of suffering a concussion, you are at a greater risk of sustaining another one

Sustaining a second impact while still concussed can be very dangerous. It is critical you not return to play while still experiencing symptoms

Some studies show women are more susceptible to concussion and their symptoms may last longer

Difficulty remembering new information is a common symptom immediately after suffering a concussion. This can be very problematic for concussed students

What is a concussion?

A concussion is a **mild traumatic brain injury**. Although they are "mild", concussions do involve an injury to the brain and it is important that you allow yourself time to heal. At a microscopic level, the neuronal axons in your brain have been stretched and torn and a number of brain areas will be affected by this damage.

How long does a concussion last?

Many people recovery quickly and are able to return to normal activities within a week or two, however for others it will take longer to recover. Unfortunately, there is no way to predict how quickly someone's concussion will heal.

Symptoms:

There are a wide range of symptoms associated with concussions. Common symptoms include:

- headaches, dizziness & fatigue
- balance or coordination problems
- nausea/vomiting
- feeling "dinged", "foggy", "stunned", or "dazed", mental confusion
- being easily distracted, poor concentration
- delayed response to questions
- slurred speech
- vacant staring or glassy eyed
- increased sensitivity to light, noise and smells
- visual problems (seeing stars, flashing lights, double vision)
- hearing problems (ringing in the ears, difficulty hearing)
- irritability or aggression
- emotional changes (e.g. anxiety or depression)
- personality changes
- problems with memory, difficulty remembering things

Disclaimer: the information presented here should not take precedence over medical advice. Please make sure you follow any instructions given to you by medical personnel



How to deal with your concussion

The most important thing for you to do is **rest, both physically and mentally**, while you are recovering from your concussion. This rest will allow your brain time to heal. Rest does not mean stopping all activity, but only engaging in light activities that do not more than moderately increase your concussion symptoms.

Immediately following your concussion you should stop intensive physical/athletic activities.

In the first 24 hours, you should limit/minimize:

- rigorous movements/activities
- bright lights
- school work
- screen time
- playing videogames

All of these activities may trigger or worsen your concussion symptoms. You should re-assess your symptoms after you have rested.

You should continue with other light activities if possible. This can include making meals, calm visits with friends or family, light walking, etc. But be careful to monitor your symptoms. If something increases your symptoms more than moderately you should reduce or stop that activity. Different people's symptoms will be triggered by different activities, so you may not be able to handle the same things as someone else with a concussion. Every concussion is unique.

Step-wise return to play policy

It is essential that you wait for your concussion to heal before you fully resume physical/athletic activity. Attempting to return to play before your symptoms resolve may increase the length of your recovery time and also puts you at risk for more serious injuries.

After you have been symptom free for at least 24 hours, contact the athletic therapist to discuss your return to play. You should begin physical/athletic activities "a bit at a time" and under the athletic therapist's guidance. If more than moderate symptoms return while performing activities you should return to rest, or a lower step in the return-to-play protocol. If your symptoms do not return, you may move on to the next step in the sequence. Generally, athletes would take a min of 1 week to move through all steps. While you are recovering, you must be very careful to avoid an additional head injury.

Concussion & Alcohol

It is recommended that you do not drink alcohol while concussed. The concern is not alcohol itself, but that alcohol may make your symptoms worse (i.e. headaches, nausea, dizziness) and intoxication may put you at a heightened risk for a second impact (for example, by making you dizzy and more likely to trip and fall). Also, after a concussion your decision-making may already be impaired and intoxication may further impact your ability to make appropriate decisions. It is also recommended that you avoid any drugs that have not been prescribed to you by your physician for similar reasons.



Step-wise return to school protocol

Just like with physical activity, it is essential that you wait for your concussion to begin to heal before you resume normal academic activities. Attempting to return to school before severe symptoms resolve may increase the length of your recovery time and be counterproductive.

Immediately following a concussion, it is recommended that you stop physical/athletic and academic activities for a period of at least 24 hours. During this time period you should be relatively **resting (physically and mentally)**.

- Avoid strenuous movement, bright lights, working on a computer, playing videogames...these type of activities can aggravate concussion symptoms for many people, but do continue with light, daily activities if you are able.

Inform your professors/instructors that you have suffered from a concussion and that this might impact your activities in class. **It is recommended you contact the Meighen Centre** as they can help you navigate this process. You can also ask your coach or the athletic therapist to reach out to the Meighen Centre for you.

Re-assess your symptoms after 24 hours. If your symptoms are under control, you can begin to return to your athletic and academic activities in a step-wise manner. If not, continue resting.

Once your symptoms reduce to a tolerable level, you can begin the return to academic activities. If symptoms increase more than moderately while performing any of the steps described below it is recommended that you return to a previous step.

1. Prepare to return to academic activities

- Begin by engaging in **light mental activity** (for example, reading) for short periods of time.
- Limit other mental/cognitive activities, especially those known to worsen concussion symptoms like using a computer, texting and playing videogames.
- *The goal is to begin to engage in short periods of different types of mental activity while avoiding activities that more than mildly/moderately trigger or worsen your symptoms.*

Dealing with persistent symptoms?

Identify environmental factors that may trigger (or worsen) symptoms. Common triggers include:

- **lighting:** many individuals recovering from concussions are light sensitive. Try to avoid very bright or "flickering" lights as they may induce headaches or dizziness
- **scents:** scent-sensitivity may be increased after a concussion
- **environmental distractors:** some individuals recovering from a concussion will be easily distracted and may have lowered ability to ignore things in their environment
- **ergonomics:** avoid positions that may put additional strain on the neck/ shoulders to avoid triggering a headache
- **headache triggers:** headaches are common when recovering from concussion. Common headache triggers include *emotional stress, sleep disturbances, bright lights, smells, or hunger*. Relaxation training may be a helpful, non-drug treatment option for persistent headaches.

2. Increase your academic activities

- Return to class.
 - You may wish to return to a single class, or a limited number of classes at first; pick a class that is scheduled during a time period where you are typically alert with fewer symptoms.
 - Try to arrange for someone else to take notes; focus on paying attention and participating during class times.
 - Change your seating arrangement if you find you are easily distracted (for example, ask to sit at the front of the room so you are not sidetracked by students in front of you).
- Work on short/small assignments.
 - Work for short periods of time and rest between academic work sessions.
 - Avoid working on a computer if it causes headaches, eye strain, or neck/head tension.
- Begin reading course materials for short periods of time.
- Continue to limit other problematic cognitive activities (e.g. playing on the internet, texting, watching TV, etc.) to short periods of time.
- *The goal is to increase the amount of time you can spend on mental/academic activities and also to increase the number of mental/academic activities you engage in.*

3. Increase your academic workload

- Return to more/all classes.
 - Begin taking notes during class time.
- Work on major assignments, tests and projects.
- *The goal is to return to normal levels of mental/academic activities.*

4. Return to your normal academic workload

- Return to all classes.
- Arrange to take tests & complete missed work.

PLEASE NOTE...managing your academic program is important when recovering from a concussion. **If your symptoms are severe or persist for a longer period, it may be in your best interest to consider withdrawing from some or all of your classes to better focus on your recovery.** Please seek academic advising and consult Academic Calendar section 10.7.1 for information about missed coursework or tests and 10.4.4 for course withdrawal after the deadline. Should you decide withdrawing is your best option you can complete Permission Request via Self-service. In rare instance, if you have completed a substantial amount of coursework but are not able to complete the remainder in a timely manner, you can apply to the Registrar for *aegrotate standing* under Calendar section 10.9.10.

Fatigue and Emotional Issues

Many people are surprised to hear that sleep disturbances and emotional issues are symptoms associated with concussion. Although not everyone will experience these symptoms, many people will find they are extremely fatigued or do not feel well rested even after a full night's sleep, and others will experience insomnia (inability to sleep). **It is very important that you get enough rest/sleep during your recovery.** Try to set up a regular sleep-wake cycle. Make sure you go to bed at a reasonable time and get up at a consistent time each morning.

Fatigue and sleep deprivation can make the other symptoms of concussion even worse. One example of this is mood or emotional disturbances. Again, not everyone with a concussion will experience mood or emotional problems, but they are common symptoms. Although it is "normal" to experience some anxiety, mild depression, or mood changes while recovering from a concussion, **you should contact your physician or the Wellness Centre if your symptoms are severe, disturbing, or you feel overwhelmed by them.**

Resources

Meighen Centre
(506) 364-2641; accessibility@mta.ca
- temporary academic accommodations & support

MTA Health Services
364-2172; health@mta.ca
- medical/wellness assistance

MTA Counseling Services
364-22163; counselor@mta.ca
- assistance with emotional or adjustment issues & psychological well-being

MTA Registrar's Office
364-2269; regoffice@mta.ca
- assistance with course management, course enrollment, medical withdrawal

SYMPTOM	GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS
Headaches when working on a computer	• Reduce screen time/computer use until your symptoms lessen/go away • Increase the font size or magnification of the document • Make sure there is a sharp contrast between the text and background colours • Avoid displays or websites with rapidly changing displays (e.g. flashes, vivid lights or colours, etc.) • Make sure you are not putting increased tension on your shoulders, neck & head • Wear your glasses/contact lenses (if required)
Unfocused, difficulty with attention	• Break tasks/assignments into smaller units • Focus on one step of an assignment at a time • Avoid multi-tasking; turn off your phone and other diversions while working • Avoid working in a distracting environment (e.g. noisy, lots of people, lots of movement)
Problems with sustained attention, can't focus for long periods of time	• Do not try to focus/pay attention for excessive periods of time, especially soon after a concussion • Take frequent breaks; during the break make sure you are not engaging in another taxing activity, the point is to rest • Practice focusing your attention for longer and longer periods of time (e.g. train your attention) • Get a note-taker for your classes, ask permission to record classes, or ask professor if he/she is willing to give you copies of class/lecture materials
Difficulty processing written information	• Increase the font size of printed material • Double space everything • Try to make units of information perceptually distinct (e.g. put extra spaces between paragraphs, questions, or assignment questions) • Reduce the amount of information per page (e.g. put few questions or points on each page) • Use strategies to help focus your attention like moving your finger under text as you read it, or using a ruler to remind you which line of text you should be focusing on; do not use these strategies if they trigger other symptoms (such as dizziness)
Semantic memory deficits; difficulty finding the appropriate word	• Make sure you use effective study strategies. You may find it more difficult to learn new information following a concussion, therefore it is important that you use the most effective study strategies possible • Use a dictionary or thesaurus when you have problems thinking of a particular word • Try to use gestures to help you find the word you are looking for • Try to remember the sounds of the word you are looking for (rather than focusing on the meaning)
Short-term memory deficits	• Make sure you pay attention...some problems with short-term remembering are due to attention problems • Do not try to remember too much information at one time • Write things down; try to either carry a small notepad or use an app • Ask for written instructions for any new information you are given (e.g. how to take new medications or new class assignments) • Repeat back instructions or other important information (this not only helps you remember it, but also makes sure you understood it correctly) • Gradually train yourself to hold small amounts of information in memory for longer and longer periods of time before recalling them (e.g. train your memory)

SYMPTOM	GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS
Prospective memory problems (remembering to do things in the future)	• Use a calendar to remind you of appointments (electronic calendars or apps with a “reminder” function can be very helpful) • Try to create physical reminders (e.g. put your medication container on the kitchen counter near where you make your breakfast to remind you to take your medication in the morning) • Avoid procrastinating... do not give yourself the opportunity to forget • Avoid multi-tasking...if you start to do something else you are more likely to forget to do another task • Link what you need to do to another well-established habit (e.g. take your medication right after you brush your teeth each morning) • Ask your professor or a friend to give you reminders of upcoming due dates
Difficulties as a result of mental slowness; it takes time to think & respond to things	• Monitor your performance...are you missing parts of the conversation? Do not be afraid to ask someone to slow down or repeat what they just said • Try to anticipate what will be involved in various tasks (e.g. what will you be doing in a science lab today...what are the steps involved? Or, you are going to visit your professor, what do topics do you want to discuss with them?) • Do things in advance to prepare for time-based tasks (e.g. ask your instructor if you can review the protocols you will be using in your science lab before lab time? Or, write down all the topics you want to cover during a meeting) • Avoid becoming panicked, overwhelmed, or rushed...develop strategies to help yourself if you start to feel overwhelmed • Be aware of when you are becoming overwhelmed...if you start to feel panicked or feel like you have a “full head” take a moment, pause & re-orient yourself • If there are situations where you commonly feel overwhelmed, try to figure out strategies in advance to deal with those specific situations
Difficulty planning	• Use an organizer, scheduling app or calendar to remind you of upcoming events & deadlines • Make a “To do” list each day; list things in the order of importance (list what you <i>must</i> do first, put things you would like to get done at the bottom of the list) • Make a list of steps for tasks you need to do and when they need to be done; check off each step as you complete it • Ask professors, TAs or classmates to help you organize/plan the necessary steps for complex or difficult assignments • Create a “home work” or “assignment” folder where you keep copies of the requirements for your academic work
Fatigue	• <i>Fatigue will increase other symptoms and proper rest is required for recovery</i> • Make sure you stick to a normal sleep-wake cycle (e.g. go to bed early, do not stay up all night) and try to get a full night's sleep • Adjust your schedule so you can do important tasks when you are most alert and symptom-free (for most people this will be late morning or early afternoon) • Avoid scheduling back-to-back activities, especially early in your recovery
Mood or emotional issues	• Be aware that concussions can impact mood and emotional well-being • Seek assistance from the Wellness Centre if the symptoms you are experiencing are severe or disturbing • Ask friends and family to monitor for changes in your mood and/or personality