

Concussion Recovery

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Concussion Recovery

What is a concussion?

A concussion is a traumatic brain injury (TBI). It is caused by an impact or forceful motion of your head or body that causes your brain to move inside your skull. This movement can injure your brain.

If your brain moves hard enough, the nerve fibres in your brain may twist and stretch. This can change how the chemicals in your brain work for a short time.

You do not need to hit your head directly or lose consciousness to have a concussion.

You will likely have some symptoms after a concussion. Some of the symptoms may start right away and some may start days after your injury.

There is no single test or symptom to diagnose a concussion. **If you think you may have a concussion, it is important that you visit an Emergency Department (ED) right away to be assessed and diagnosed.**

How long will my symptoms last?

Each person's recovery after a concussion is different. Some people recover quickly, others take longer to recover.

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 that is affected, and how much damage there is. It is hard to predict how long a concussion will last.

Over time, most people's symptoms go away on their own or are managed well enough that they are able to return to their usual activities.

What are the symptoms to watch for (“red flags”)?

Although it is normal and expected that you will have symptoms after a concussion, there are some symptoms that we call “red flags”.

If you have any of these “red flag” symptoms, go to the nearest Emergency Department right away:

- › Weakness or tingling/burning in your arm(s) or leg(s)
- › Severe (very bad) headache or headache that is getting worse
- › Seizure-like activity
- › Confusion that is getting worse (such as not being able to remember new events, or recognize people or places)
- › Fluid or bleeding from your ear(s) or nose that does not stop
- › Sudden or severe vomiting (throwing up)
- › Restless, agitated, or aggressive behaviour that is getting worse
- › Slurred speech or trouble talking
- › Double vision
- › Change in behaviour (such as acting strange, saying things that do not make sense)

The first few weeks of recovery

- Symptoms usually go away in several weeks to 3 months.
- You should rest for the first 24 to 48 hours (1 to 2 days) after your injury. After 48 hours, slowly increase your activities, as you are able.
- Take it easy as you increase your usual activities. The goal is to slowly increase your tolerance for activities over time, without increasing your symptoms too much.
- Do not do activities that will put you at risk for having another concussion especially during the recovery period.
- It is common for symptoms to get worse at times during recovery. If your symptoms get worse, increase your activities over time. Symptoms that get worse may be a sign that you are taking on too much, too quickly.
- Track your activities and symptoms in a journal. This can help you see if certain activities make your symptoms worse.
- Most people feel better after 4 weeks. If you are still experiencing symptoms after 4 weeks, it is important to follow up with your primary health care provider and closely monitor your symptoms.

What are the possible symptoms of a concussion?

Each concussion is different and every person will experience symptoms differently. The following things can make symptoms worse:

- › Stress
- › Fatigue (feeling tired)
- › Pain

It may take longer to recover if you do too much too soon.

Physical symptoms

Physical changes are common after a concussion. Physical symptoms of a concussion include:

- › Headaches
- › Dizziness
- › Balance problems
- › Sensitivity to light and/or noise
- › Blurred vision
- › Ringing in the ears
- › Fatigue
- › Feeling slowed down

Headaches

Headaches are a normal part of the recovery process. If they hurt more and/or happen more often, talk with your primary health care provider.

If you manage your headaches early in your recovery, it may help you to recover faster.

Things that may help with headaches:

- › Rest.
- › Have a good sleep routine (go to bed and get up at the same time each day).
- › Spend only short periods of time (15 to 30 minutes) using electronic devices (such as smartphones, computers, tablets).
- › Keep tasks simple and short.
- › Do one thing at a time.
- › Remove distractions, if possible (like noise, TV, people).
- › Eat healthy foods and stay hydrated (drink plenty of water) throughout the day.
- › Talk with your primary health care provider about medications that may help.

Dizziness

Dizziness is common after a concussion. Each person's experience with this symptom can be unique. You may feel like your head or the room is spinning, or you may feel lightheaded. Dizziness can be caused by:

- › The brain injury from the concussion
- › Changes in blood pressure
- › Emotional upset
- › Fatigue
- › Vision problems
- › Middle ear problems

Things that may help with dizziness:

- › Do not move suddenly or change positions quickly. Instead, try to move slowly when rolling over in bed, sitting or standing up, or turning your head or body.
- › Eat healthy foods and stay hydrated throughout the day.
- › When exercising, make sure that any activity you choose does not put you at a risk of a fall and/or injury. For example, to keep your balance always make sure you have something to hold on to.
- › Stay physically active, but make sure that the activities you choose do not put you at a risk of a fall or injury. For example, always make sure you have something to hold on to to keep your balance.

Balance problems

You may feel clumsy or unsteady on your feet (with or without feeling dizzy).

You may find it harder to walk on uneven ground (like grass or gravel) than you did before your concussion.

Things that may help with balance problems:

- › Slow down.
- › Wear supportive shoes, indoors and outdoors.
- › Clear clutter from the floor, such as small rugs or other items.
- › Walk slowly on uneven surfaces.
- › Use handrails on stairs.
- › Make sure there is enough light in rooms and on stairs. Use night lights in hallways and bathrooms.

Sensitivity to light and/or noise, blurred vision, ringing in the ears

You may find that light and/or noise bothers you more than it did before your concussion.

Things that may help with light and/or noise sensitivity:

- › Wear sunglasses, even indoors if light bothers you early in your recovery.
- › Wear a hat with a brim to block out light.
- › Spend less time under harsh lighting (like fluorescent lighting) until your symptoms get better.
- › Use earplugs to help block noise, as needed. You do not need to use them all the time.
- › Spend less time in noisy places (like malls, parties, grocery stores) until your symptoms get better.

**Now may be a good time to consider taking
a break from reading this guide.**

Fatigue

Fatigue is very common after a concussion. You may wake up feeling tired, and/or 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. If your symptoms start to get worse as you do more activities, this may be a sign that you are pushing yourself too hard.

Things that may help with fatigue:

- Know your signs of fatigue (such as clumsiness, feeling heavy, headaches, having trouble thinking or finding the right words, making mistakes, feeling grumpy).
- Schedule rest periods throughout the day. Set an alarm to remind you to rest.
- Pace yourself. Break tasks into smaller parts. Set priorities, and spread the tasks out over the week.
- Limit your screen time, including computers, smartphones, TV, and tablets.
- Do gentle exercise, like a short walk or yoga.
- Slowly go back to doing the activities that you normally do. The goal is to gradually increase your tolerance for activities without increasing your fatigue too much.
- Being less active can lead to low energy levels. It is important **not** to spend most of your day sitting or lying down.
- Some medications can make fatigue worse. If you have any concerns about your medication(s), talk with your primary health care provider.

Cognitive (thinking) symptoms

Changes in thinking skills (cognition) are common after a concussion.

Cognitive effects of a concussion include:

- › Trouble concentrating or paying attention
- › Less able to tolerate conversations, activities, or busy environments
- › Taking longer to think
- › Feeling in a fog or dazed
- › Trouble finding words
- › Trouble remembering

Trouble concentrating or paying attention

- 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.

Taking longer to think, and/or feeling in a fog or dazed

- You may feel like you are in a daze, which makes it harder to think clearly. It may take you longer to think, process, and/or respond during conversations.

Trouble remembering

- You may have trouble remembering things to do, such as taking your medication(s) or keeping track of appointments.
- You may find that you forget what you have said or done, or you forget details of what people have said.
- You may misplace things.

Things that may help with cognitive symptoms:

Rest

Rest does not have to be a nap. Sometimes a change in activity is as good as a break. Some suggestions for rest include:

- › Go somewhere quiet with no distractions for 15 to 30 minutes.
- › Lay down for 30 minutes with no distractions (like a TV or smartphone).
- › Close your door, do not answer your phone, and dim the lights for 15 minutes.
- › Sit somewhere quiet with headphones on and listen to soft music for 15 minutes.
- › Change the type of activity you are doing. For example, it can be restful to move from a mentally difficult activity (like paperwork) to a physical activity (like walking).
- › Switch between easy and hard tasks.

Plan ahead

- Give yourself more time to get things done. For example, if it took you 10 minutes to get ready to go somewhere before your concussion, give yourself 20 minutes now.
- Work for shorter periods of time and take breaks more often.

If you know that you are going to be in a stimulating (noisy or busy) place, have a plan. Your plan might include:

- › Taking short breaks away from the activity.
- › Using earplugs for short periods of time to help with noise sensitivity.
- › Wearing sunglasses to help with light sensitivity.
- › Removing distractions, where possible (like turning off the radio, TV, or phone, or not having a conversation while driving).
- › Going to restaurants, running errands, and shopping at times and on days when it is less busy.

Keep things simple

- Do one thing at a time.
- Break tasks into smaller steps.
- Keep things you use often in one place (such as keys, wallet, phone).
- Put reminders where you are likely to see them (such as the fridge, front door, mirror).

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, planner, or smartphone.

Staying organized helps lower the number of things you need to keep track of in your head.

Ask for help

Do not overload yourself with too many things to do. Ask people to help you by:

- › repeating things, especially if there are a lot of details or new information.
- › writing things down for you.
- › talking more slowly.
- › not interrupting you during a task.

Emotional symptoms

Emotional changes are common after a concussion. Emotional effects of a concussion include:

- › Feeling more sensitive, emotional, or sad
- › Feeling stressed, worried, or overwhelmed
- › Feeling irritable, frustrated, or angry
- › Having a shorter fuse or feeling impatient

Changes in mood

You may not feel like yourself. You may feel sad, worried, overwhelmed, or anxious.

Many things can affect your mood (like pain, fatigue, stress). It is important that you manage these things well.

Things that may help with your mood:

- › Talk to your family and friends about how you feel.
- › Do gentle exercise.
- › Eat healthy foods and stay hydrated throughout the day.
- › Have a good sleep routine (go to bed and get up at the same time each day).
- › Do something relaxing every day for at least 15 minutes. This could include things like meditation, deep breathing, taking a bath, or doing gentle yoga.
- › Try to do something you enjoy every day.

If changes in your mood last longer than a couple of weeks, talk with your primary health care provider.

Feeling irritable, frustrated, or angry

- You may find that you feel “on edge” more often. You may lose patience more quickly or have a “shorter fuse”.
- Fatigue, sensitivity to light and noise, and other symptoms may make you feel irritable.
- Your family and friends may say they have to “walk on eggshells” around you or feel like they have to be careful about what they say to you.

Things that may help when you feel irritable:

- › Set reasonable expectations for yourself. Do not try to do too much at once.
- › Try to identify situations, thoughts, or feelings that bother you. Things like pain, being rushed, feeling fatigued, 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 for and practice how you will deal with frustrations.
- › Since fatigue makes irritability worse, try to manage your fatigue by resting often and getting a good night’s sleep.
- › Do gentle exercise, like a short walk or yoga.

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a break from reading this guide.**

Sleep-related symptoms

You may have trouble falling and/or staying asleep, feel drowsy during the day, or not feel rested even after a good night's sleep. Sleep-related symptoms include:

- › Sleeping more than usual
- › Feeling drowsy during the day
- › Trouble falling asleep
- › Trouble staying asleep
- › Not feeling rested even after sleeping

Things that may help with sleep:

- › Exercise earlier in the day. Avoid exercising too close to bedtime.
- › Do things you find relaxing before bedtime.
- › Keep the same bedtime routine every day.
- › Start getting ready for bed at least 30 minutes before bedtime (lock the house, put on pyjamas, brush your teeth, turn down the lights).
- › Make your bedroom as comfortable and quiet as possible.
- › Sleep in a dark room.
- › Lower the bedroom temperature.
- › Limit foods or drinks with caffeine, a lot of sugar, or alcohol.
- › Do not use a smartphone, tablet, or watch TV before bedtime.

Try to be patient and give yourself time to learn these new habits and routines. It can take time to settle into a better sleep pattern. If these suggestions do not help, talk with your primary health care provider.

Frequently asked questions

Can I use alcohol or drugs after a concussion?

- Do not use alcohol and/or drugs for at least 48 hours (2 days) after your injury.
- Using alcohol or drugs after a concussion may slow your recovery.
- After a concussion, you may be more sensitive to the effects of alcohol and drugs.
- Alcohol and drugs can affect your judgment and balance, placing you at more risk for another concussion.
- The best way to recover from a concussion is to avoid using alcohol or drugs until you no longer have symptoms.

When can I drive again?

- After a concussion, symptoms such as fatigue, slowed response time, and being easily distracted can affect your ability to drive safely.
- You should not return to driving right away. You should have no symptoms, or have your symptoms under control before you drive again. This may take a few days to a week. Talk with your primary health care provider if you have any questions.

When can I return to work or school?

- How much time you need off from work will depend on the job you do. We recommend that you return to work slowly.
- Most people can start to return to work or school 1 to 2 weeks after their injury.
- A concussion can make it hard to focus, and to process and remember information. This may affect how you perform at work or school.
- You may want to talk with your employer or school about accommodations to support you as you return to work or school. Examples of accommodations include working less hours, extra time to complete tasks, having a quiet space to work, and a reduced workload.

What can I do to prevent another concussion?

- Always wear a seatbelt when you are in a car, ATV, or any other vehicle.
- Always wear a helmet when riding a bike, skateboarding, or doing any activity where you could hit your head. Helmets do not prevent concussions, but they can prevent more serious injuries to the brain.
- Do not do activities that put you at risk of another injury. Examples include: drinking alcohol, using drugs, climbing on ladders or stools, playing contact sports, driving motorized vehicles (like ATVs, snowmobiles, seadoos, motorcycles), skating, skateboarding, skiing, and snowboarding.
- Do not return to organized sports until your primary health care provider says that it is OK.

What can I do to help my recovery?

- Talk with your primary health care provider.
- Rest, both physically and mentally, for 24 to 48 hours (1 to 2 days) after your injury. Sleep at night and rest during the day. You do not need to be woken up every hour — it is normal and necessary (needed) to sleep more after a concussion. Rest is very important because it helps your brain to heal.
- Slowly return to your daily activities and sports. Do not avoid all activity.
- Take care of your basic needs. Make time to relax and manage stress (self-care).
- Limit your screen time, including computers, smartphones, TV, and tablets.
- Work or study less. Try to take a short time off from work or school to recover.
- Get support from your family, friends, and community.
- Eat healthy meals regularly. Your brain needs fuel for recovery.
- Drink enough liquids. Do not drink diet soft drinks, as some artificial sweeteners may cause headaches.
- Exercise. Start with gentle workouts, such as walking, yoga, or riding a stationary bike.

Things to remember

- Most people make a full recovery.
- Rest is important.
- Slowly become more active over time.
- Use your symptoms as a guide.
- Ask your primary health care provider for help if your symptoms continue for more than 4 to 6 weeks.

Nova Scotia Health Concussion Education Sessions (offered online)

Concussion education sessions are being offered for people (16 years of age or older) who are experiencing symptoms from a concussion within the past 6 months.

In part 1, information is provided about:

- › What is a concussion?
- › Common symptoms to expect after a concussion
- › What to expect during the recovery process
- › Information and strategies to help manage symptoms and promote recovery
- › Helpful resources

In part 2, information is provided about:

- › Conserving energy (the 4 P's- Prioritize, Plan, Pace, and Position)
- › Managing sleep issues
- › Managing headaches
- › Returning to regular activities including work and school
- › Preventing another injury

To self-register:

- › Phone: 902-473-8610
- › Online: <https://abi.nshealth.ca>

All sessions are held live online, and are facilitated by Rehabilitation and Supportive Care - Acquired Brain Injury Services.

Notes:

Looking for more health information?

Find this pamphlet and all our patient resources here: <https://library.nshealth.ca/PatientEducation>
Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.

For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time: call 811 or visit <https://811.novascotia.ca>

Learn about other programs and services in your community: call 211 or visit <http://ns.211.ca>

*Nova Scotia Health Authority promotes a smoke-free, vape-free, and scent-free environment.
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