

# Family Education Sheet

## Caring for your child after a head injury



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This sheet explains how to care for your child after a head injury.

- Watch your child closely over the next 2-3 days.
- Call your child's pediatrician or go to the ED if you are worried about your child.
- Your child must avoid any activity that may increase their risk for another head injury.

### What is a head injury?

A head injury is caused by a blow or jolt to the head or body that disrupts the normal function of the brain. They are common in children.

**Mild injuries** cause a brief change in mental status or consciousness.

**Moderate to severe injuries** cause unconsciousness ("blackouts") for a longer time or bleeding in the brain.

### What is a concussion?

A concussion is a type of mild injury that disrupts the way the brain functions. Some children may lose consciousness (or blackout), or they may not remember what happened right before or after the injury. But this may not happen, and your child could still have a concussion.

### What are common causes of a head injury?

- Falls
- Motor vehicle (car) collisions and whiplash
- Being hit by or against something, like by being hit in the head by a baseball
- Sports
- Bicycle crashes

### What are the symptoms of a head injury?

It can affect your child's:

- Thinking, memory, concentration, reasoning
- Senses of touch, taste, hearing, sight, and smell
- Language, including communication, expression, and understanding
- Emotions and behavior, including (depression, anxiety, personality changes, aggression, acting out and social inappropriateness)

### Signs often are:

<b>Physical</b> Headaches, nausea, tired, problems with vision or balance, sensitivity to light/noise, numbness/tingling, vomiting, dizziness	<b>Thinking</b> Feeling mentally foggy, problems concentrating, problems remembering, feeling slowed down
<b>Emotional</b> Irritability, sadness, feeling emotional, nervousness	<b>Sleep</b> Drowsiness, sleeping changes

### How can I help with symptoms?

- Minimize screen time (TV, computers, tablets, and phones) as your child recovers. They can use a computer if necessary when they go back to school, but only for 15 minutes at a time.
- They should not play video games.
- Keep your child away from very noisy and very bright places, like movie theaters.
- Avoid places with large crowds.
- Try not to do too many activities.

### What physical activities should my child do?

The best way to help your child recover is to make sure they rest. Every child is different and needs different amounts of rest. Your child's doctor will talk with you about how the guidelines below apply to your child.

- When your child is ready to go back to full days of school (see next page), they can do light activity, like walking, stretching and balance. Try 10-15 minutes of exercise at a time and watch for symptoms.
- Until the doctor says it's OK, your child should not play contact sports.
- Always lower your child's activity level if you notice an increase in symptoms. They may need a rest break.

**Your child must avoid any activity that may increase their risk for another head injury. Ask the doctor when your child can go to the gym and play sports.**

## When should my child return to school?

- They need to take a few (2-3) days off from school right after the injury.
- After 2-3 days of cognitive rest, your child can probably go back to school with a modified schedule as symptoms don't get worse. If symptoms are gone, it's OK to skip these next steps and go back to doing full days and usual academic work.
- Work with the school to make a plan for completing missed and upcoming assignments, and for allowing extra time to complete schoolwork.
- Your child should take rest breaks throughout the day if symptoms get worse.
- They should sit out of classes that might make symptoms worse (like band).
- The goal is to avoid the return of severe symptoms. But keep in mind that "brain work" is not dangerous. Symptoms that get worse by reading will not harm your child's brain.

## Will my child's injury impact their performance at school?

Returning to school can be stressful because:

- Your child may have anxiety and worry about schoolwork.
- Teachers, students, and school staff may not understand how a head injury can make learning difficult.
- Your child may have trouble with memory, reading, note-taking, paying attention, and concentrating.

**It's important for your child to go to school even if it's only a few hours.** This will help them keep a schedule, interact with friends, and avoid isolation.

You should meet with teachers, the school nurse, and guidance counselor to go over your child's plan.

## How can I help my child stay healthy while they recover?

Here are some guidelines:

### Eating and drinking

Your child should:

- Not skip meals
- Have a small, healthy snack in between meals
- Drink at least 6 to 8, 8-oz glasses of water a day
- Have some drinks with electrolytes—but just a little because of the added sugar
- Eat a little bit of salt from salty snacks, like pretzels or crackers
- Limit caffeinated drinks, like coffee, tea, soda, sugary drinks and those with artificial (not real) sweeteners
- Not have caffeine after lunchtime (including chocolate)

## Sleep

Your child should:

- Stick to a bedtime routine, like turning down the lights, doing a quiet activity (reading) and lowering the temperature in the room
- Avoid TV, phones, computer and screen time 1–2 hours before bedtime
- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, including weekends
- Not be very active within 3 hours of going to bed

## Stress and relaxation

- Work with your child's school to help with stress. This could mean cutting back on homework or allowing extra time for assignments.
- Practice relaxation at home by doing calming activities like reading, taking a warm bath, or listening to soft music.
- Complementary and alternative therapies may help your child relax mentally and physically. These include massage, Reiki, acupuncture, yoga, biofeedback, and seeing a chiropractor.
- Try meditating with your child, using visualization and guided imagery. A therapist or cognitive behavioral therapist can help you with this.

## Medications

- Follow the recommendations from your child's health care provider about using an over-the-counter medicine to manage symptoms.
- If your doctor recommended acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or naproxen for headaches, **do not give them more than 3 times in a week.** They can cause headaches if your child takes them too much.

## When should I call the doctor?

Contact your child's pediatrician if your child:

- Has a seizure
- Looks very drowsy or has trouble being woken up
- Throws up or is nauseous a lot
- Has weakness, numbness, decreased coordination or unsteadiness when walking
- Has a headache that gets worse and does not go away
- Slurs their speech or has trouble speaking
- Has trouble recognizing people or places
- Experiences double vision
- Acts confused, restless, agitated or other unusual behavior
- Loses consciousness (blacks out)
- Is getting worse even after resting
- Starts struggling in school

You may also contact the Brain Injury Center at (617) 355-6015 with concerns.