

## **Heads Up: What Every Young Athlete Should Know About Concussions**

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### **Game On: Think Fast, Play Safe**

For many children and teenagers, sports are more than just a game; they are a source of confidence, character, and connection. From school teams to weekend leagues, young athletes are constantly learning how to push themselves and grow beyond their comfort zone. Along with these benefits, however, there is a risk that is too often overlooked: concussions.<sup>1</sup>

A concussion is a type of brain injury that can affect how a person thinks, feels, and functions. In athletes ages 8–18, recognizing and responding to concussions early is essential. Concussions are among the most common injuries in youth sports, underscoring the importance of early recognition and education.<sup>1</sup> Many young athletes do not immediately recognize concussion symptoms or may hesitate to report them, highlighting the need for increased education and open communication.<sup>2</sup> Awareness is not about limiting participation in sports; it is about protecting the developing brain and supporting long-term health, ensuring that young athletes can safely return to the activities they love.<sup>1</sup>

### **What Happens to the Brain?**

A concussion occurs when a hit or sudden movement causes the brain to shift inside the skull. This can happen during contact sports, falls, or even brief collisions while playing that may not seem severe at first. Importantly, a concussion does not always involve loss of consciousness. Because the injury is not visible from the outside, it can be easy to miss without careful attention to symptoms.<sup>1</sup>

### **Concussion Clues: Spot, Act, Recover**

Recognizing the signs of a concussion is one of the most important steps in protecting young athletes.

Common symptoms include:

- Headache or pressure in the head
- Fogginess
- Dizziness or balance problems
- Slowed reaction times
- Confusion or difficulty concentrating
- Sleepiness or feeling drowsy
- Sensitivity to light or noise
- Nausea or fatigue<sup>1,2</sup>

Concussions can also affect emotional well-being. Some young athletes may experience:

- Irritability
- Emotional instability
- Anxiety
- Mood changes
- Difficulty sleeping<sup>2</sup>

These symptoms may appear right away or develop over several hours or days. Taking them seriously is key.<sup>1</sup>

### **Clues Continued: When in Doubt, Sit Them Out**

If a concussion is suspected, the athlete should be removed from play immediately.<sup>1,2,3</sup> They should not return to the game or practice the same day, even if symptoms seem mild. Continuing to play increases the risk of further injury and can prolong recovery.<sup>1,3</sup> A medical evaluation is essential to determine the next steps and ensure safe management.<sup>1,3</sup>

### **TLC: Why Young Brains Need Extra Care**

Children and adolescents are not simply “small adults.” Their brains are still developing, which makes them more vulnerable to injury and, in some cases, longer recovery periods.<sup>2</sup>

There can also be pressure to continue playing, whether from teammates, competition, or personal motivation. Creating an environment where young athletes feel comfortable reporting symptoms is critical.

### **Rest, Recover, Return**

Recovery from a concussion takes time and varies from person to person. Most young athletes improve within a couple of weeks, though some symptoms may last longer.<sup>2,4</sup> Some young athletes may take longer to recover than others. Recovery can be influenced by factors such as age, the number of symptoms at the time of injury, and individual differences. Access to care and support systems can also play an important role in how well and how quickly someone recovers.<sup>4</sup>

Initial management often includes a period of relative rest from activity, schoolwork, and screen use, followed by a gradual return to school and physical activity under guidance. Returning too quickly can worsen symptoms.<sup>1</sup> A full recovery followed by a return to activity and/or sport is done with a stepwise program while evaluating for a return of symptoms.<sup>3</sup>

It is also important to recognize that recovery is not only physical. Changes in mood, attention, and sleep are part of the healing process and deserve attention and support.<sup>2</sup>

### **Play Smart, Stay Safe**

While not all concussions can be prevented, there are some steps that can reduce risk:

- Using proper technique in sports
- Wearing appropriate protective equipment
- Following safety rules and guidelines<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, young athletes should know that speaking up is a sign of strength. Reporting symptoms once they are felt helps protect not only their health but their future in sports and beyond. Raising awareness about concussions is an important step in protecting young athletes and supporting their well-being. Efforts led by students and community organizations help create safer environments where health and performance go hand in hand. Organizations like Athletes for Hope continue to champion athlete well-being by encouraging conversations around health, safety, and support. By learning

to recognize the signs, respond appropriately, and support recovery, we can ensure that young athletes continue to thrive both on and off the field.

## References

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