

Concussion in the workplace



This publication is part of Headway's *About the brain* series. To browse through our publications on a range of issues relating to brain injury and download these free-of-charge, visit www.headway.org.uk/information-library.

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Introduction

A concussion can happen to anyone anywhere, and even in the safest of workplaces, accidents resulting in concussions can occur. This publication has been written to help you understand what a concussion is, how it can happen in the workplace and what to do if you or someone in your workplace sustains a concussion. This information does not replace clinical guidance.

For information on Headway's Concussion Aware campaign, visit www.headway.org.uk/news-and-campaigns/campaigns/concussion-aware.

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What is concussion?

A concussion is a type of brain injury caused by a blow to the head. It is sometimes called mild brain injury or mild traumatic brain injury.

In the workplace, a concussion can be caused by....

- Falling from a height, such as falling off a ladder
- An object striking the head with force
- Banging the head against a hard surface, such as against a low shelf
- The head being rocked back and forth such as during a traffic accident

In some cases, there may be a blow elsewhere to the body, but the force of it travels to the head to cause concussion.

Regardless of the cause, when there is a blow to the head, the nerve tissue of the brain is subjected to forces that cause damage to nerve cells, causing temporary disturbance in brain functioning. There can be both immediate and longer-term symptoms, such as problems with thinking and remembering, headaches and emotional issues. More detail on symptoms is available in the next section.

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Key points - what is concussion?

- A concussion is a type of brain injury caused by a blow to the head
- Concussions can occur in the workplace
- It is important for everyone to be concussion aware

What are the symptoms of concussion?

Following a blow to the head, symptoms can be either immediate or delayed. Common symptoms of concussion are listed below; however, it is also important to be aware of the symptoms that require urgent medical attention as they could suggest that a more serious injury has taken place - these are listed on page 4.

Immediate symptoms

First symptoms of concussion typically appear immediately or within minutes of the injury. Key symptoms to look out for include:

- Confusion
- Dizziness
- Feeling like 'in a fog'
- Balance problems
- Loss of muscle tone (limpness)
- Sensitivity to noise or light
- Feeling unusually emotional, nervous or sad

Loss of consciousness can also occur following a blow to the head. However, this only occurs in around 10% of cases, so should never be relied on as a sole indicator of concussion.

The person who has sustained the injury might report these issues, or others around might notice them. It is important that anyone with suspicion of concussion should be assessed by a medical professional - more detail on this is in the section *Immediate actions for confirmed or suspected concussion*.

Delayed symptoms

In the hours or days after a concussion, there may be issues such as the ones listed on the next page. There are normal symptoms to experience after a concussion and in most cases will improve by themselves within 2 - 4 weeks.

If any of the symptoms become problematic or continue for longer than 28 days, the person with the concussion should speak to their GP about any further assessment or support that might be needed.

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In the hours or days after a concussion, there may be issues such as...

Physical

- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Visual problems
- Nausea
- Sensitivity to light and sound
- Sleep problems
- Balance problems
- Fatigue

Cognitive

- Poor concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty with processing information
- Slowed reaction times

Emotional

- Irritability
- Low mood
- Anxiety

Key points - symptoms of concussion

- A concussion can cause a range of physical, emotional and cognitive symptoms
- Symptoms can present themselves immediately, within minutes, or over the next few days
- Loss of consciousness only occurs in around 10% of concussion cases
- It is important to be familiar with the 'red flag' symptoms of concussion

‘Red flag’ symptoms

If any of the following symptoms develop or are reported following a blow to the head, the person should be urgently medically assessed by an appropriate healthcare professional onsite, or immediately taken to a hospital Accident and Emergency (A&E) department.

- Any loss of consciousness
 - Drowsiness or deteriorating consciousness
 - Loss of memory for events before or after the injury
- Confusion or irritability out of character, or unusual behaviour
- Problems with understanding information or communicating
 - Loss of balance or problems with walking
- Decreased sensation, or pins and needles down arms/ legs
 - Blurred or double vision
 - Weakness
- Any fits (collapsing or passing out suddenly)
- Severe and increasing headache not relieved by painkillers such as paracetamol
 - Repeated vomiting
 - Reduced neck movement or severe neck pain
- Deafness in one or both ears that was not present before
 - Clear fluid coming out of the ears or nose
 - Inability to be woken
 - Bleeding from one or both ears

Immediate actions for confirmed or suspected concussion

The most important and immediate advice to follow if either you or someone else has a suspected concussion is *If in doubt, sit it out!* Do not take risks with concussion, and follow the steps below.

If the person is displaying symptoms listed in the 'Red flag' symptoms list on page 5...

The person must be given an urgent medical assessment onsite. If this is not available, they must be taken to a hospital Accident and Emergency (A&E) Department, as they might have a more serious brain injury that needs urgent care. Call 999 to use ambulance transfer if necessary.

If the person is displaying symptoms listed in the Immediate symptoms and Delayed symptoms lists on pages 3 and 4...

The person must be immediately assessed by an appropriate medical professional onsite. If this is not available, they should be kept away from work and NHS should be contacted by calling 111 within 24 hours of the injury.

It is also very important that the person a suspected concussion should not return to contact sport games, events, training or physical education (P.E) lessons within 24 hours of the suspected concussion. More guidance on this is available in our publication [Concussion in sport](#).

The person should not be left alone for 24 hours after the initial injury, as symptoms can evolve and may worsen. It is also important that they not drive a vehicle, ride a bicycle, operate machinery or drink alcohol within 24 hours of the suspected concussion.

Key points - what to do for suspected/ confirmed concussion

- A person with either suspected or confirmed concussion should be immediately assessed by a medical professional - *if in doubt, sit it out!*
- A person with either suspected or confirmed concussion should not be left alone or allowed to drive, operate machinery or drink alcohol for 24 hours after the concussion.

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Diagnosing concussion

Diagnosing a concussion (especially in non-medical settings such as sports fields) is notoriously difficult. Only suitably qualified medical professionals should attempt to diagnose concussion, and even then a cautious approach should always be taken.

There are some sideline assessment tools available such as the Sports Concussion Assessment Tool (SCAT5); however, it is important to note that these should only be used by trained professionals.

Recovering from concussion

In the first 24-48 hours of the concussion, it is important to rest and sleep as needed to give the brain time to recover. 'Resting' includes reducing screen time, such as watching TV or scrolling through social media. The person should also reduce stress where possible and avoid situations where they may feel overstimulated, for example being in busy environments. Easy activities of daily living and gentle exercise such as walking can continue, and can be helpful with recovery. Once symptoms have reduced, the person can progress through the graduated return to activity (education/ work) and sport guidance produced by the UK Government and Sport + Recreation Alliance (SRA), available at www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/policy/research-publications/concussion-guidelines.

A person with concussion will need to take time off work to recover. Remember that a concussion is a form of brain injury, so the person should not rush back to work too soon, as this can negatively affect their recovery. It can help to have an honest discussion with the employer about how the person is feeling. The person might be eligible for Statutory Sick Pay if they are off work for longer than 4 days in a row - for more information on this, visit the UK government website at www.gov.uk/statutory-sick-pay.

Further suggestions of what to do in the weeks that follow are...

Do...

- Do get rest and gentle exercise such as walking for the first 24-48 hours of the concussion being sustained. Avoid intense exercise.
- Do stay within reach of a telephone in case you need medical help over the next few days
- Do share this information with a relative or friend who can keep an eye on your condition
- Do follow the UK government/ SRA returning to activity (education/ work) and sport guidance

Don't...

- Don't stay at home alone for 24 hours after the injury
- Don't play or train for contact sports for at least 14 days without consulting an appropriate healthcare professional
- Don't drink alcohol for 24 hours after injury and until symptoms improve
- Don't return to driving for 24 hours after injury and until your symptoms improve. If in doubt, consult your GP. Commercial drivers should be reviewed by an appropriate medical professional before returning to driving.
- Don't return to sporting competition before 21 days from injury and without consulting an appropriate healthcare professional
- Don't return to work until you feel ready to
- Don't take aspirin or sleeping tablets without consulting a doctor

Above all, don't lose hope. Most people feel back to normal within 2-4 weeks, and while some people can have ongoing effects, help and support is available.

If you are struggling with concussion and your symptoms last longer than 28 days, speak to your GP.

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Key points - recovery from concussion

- Don't be left alone in the first 24 hours after concussion
- Get rest, sleep and gentle exercise for the first 24-48 hours after concussion. This includes limiting screentime.
- Follow the UK government/ SRA's graduated return to activity (education/ work) and sport guidance
- Concussion improves for most people over a few weeks. Consult your GP if you are struggling with symptoms for more than 28 days.

Post-concussion syndrome

Most people recover from concussion within 2-4 weeks if they follow the correct steps as outlined above. However, some people continue to have ongoing problems following concussion, known as post-concussion syndrome. This can be a very frustrating and distressing experience, but there are things you can do to help yourself. For more information, refer to our publication [Mild head injury and concussion](#).

Claiming compensation after concussion

If your concussion was sustained in the workplace and caused by negligence, you might be entitled to compensation. You should always seek legal advice for this. Headway's Solicitor's Directory features a list of solicitors with experience in handling brain injury cases; for more information and to access the directory, visit www.headway.org.uk/supporting-you/in-your-area/head-injury-solicitors-directory.

Frequently asked questions

I had a brain scan after my concussion, but it came back clear. Does that mean I don't have concussion after all?

Brain scans such as computerised tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance

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imaging (MRI) are sometimes performed to check for damage in the brain, but they are not powerful enough to detect damage at a microscopic level. Therefore, most concussions will not show up on a brain scan. Symptoms

such as those described earlier on (refer to page 2 onwards) can be a better indicator of concussion than relying on brain scans, but a person with suspected concussion should still always be assessed by an appropriate healthcare professional.

Can a concussion happen even if someone doesn't lose consciousness?

Only around 10% of concussions result in a loss of consciousness so this should never be relied on when trying to diagnose a concussion. Symptoms such as those listed on page 2 should be relied on as an indicator of possible concussion, followed a medical assessment by an appropriate healthcare professional.

Where can I get help for coping with concussion?

Most people recover from concussion within 2-4 weeks if they follow the correct steps as outlined earlier in this publication. However, despite being temporary symptoms in most people's cases, living with concussion can still be very difficult. Concussion can also cause emotional disturbances such as depression and anxiety. **Help is available.** Contact our nurse-led helpline on 0808 800 2244 (Monday - Friday, 9am-5pm) or helpline@headway.org.uk for information, support and a listening ear if you just need to talk to someone about your experiences. You can also contact Samaritans on 116 123.

You should speak to your GP if you are struggling with the symptoms of concussion, as they may be able to refer you to specialist support.

If you are feeling depressed following concussion, refer to our publication [*Depression after brain injury*](#).

As a charity, we rely on donations from people like you to continue providing free information to people affected by brain injury. To find out how you can get involved, visit www.headway.org.uk/get-involved.

Last reviewed 2023. Next review 2024.

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