

11 Somerset Street / PO Box 1168  
Hamilton  
Telephone (07) 839 1191  
[www.braininjurywaikato.org.nz](http://www.braininjurywaikato.org.nz)



# ABOUT CONCUSSION

## CONTENTS

### Information compiled by

D Gronwall, PhD and P Wrightson MA, FRACS

Department of Neurosurgery, Auckland Hospital

1. Why this booklet? What is concussion
2. The waking up time
  - What to do about
    - Tiredness
    - Forgetting things
    - Clumsiness
    - Irritability
    - Poor concentration
    - Noise problems
    - Eye problems
    - Headaches
    - Dizziness
    - What **NOT** to do
3. Getting back to work
4. When to seek help
5. Sport

## **WHY DID THEY GIVE YOU THIS BOOKLET**

We hope it will help you to understand what happens when you have been knocked out or concussed, and what to expect while you are getting over it. You will also find advice about what to do and what not to do until you are better and how to set about getting help if you need it.

## **GUIDANCE FOR FAMILIES**

Your relative has sustained a head injury. Keep an eye on him/her and look out for:

- 1. Drowsiness or difficulty in rousing the patient.**
- 2. Repeated vomiting.**
- 3. Complaints of dizziness or blurred vision**
- 4. Increasing persistent headaches.**

**PLEASE CONTACT YOUR GENERAL PRACTITIONER IF ANY OF THE ABOVE SYMPTOMS OCCUR.**

## **1 WHAT IS CONCUSSION**

Concussion is the result of a bang to the head which either makes you lose consciousness, or makes you giddy for a while. Concussion means a shaking-up and this shaking-up affect your sleeping-waking system. In the accident your head was banged and you went to sleep immediately, which is just another way of saying that you lost consciousness. Just as it normally takes people a little while to wake up properly from an ordinary night's sleep, so it seems to take some days to wake up completely from the accidental sleep that is concussion.

Until you are properly awake your brain has less energy to work on than it normally gets from your waking up system. This means that many of the ordinary things that you do may be difficult for a while. Even remembering things that happen to you uses up energy. In hospital you were probably asked to remember before and after the accident. This is because everyone who has been concussed has a memory gap.

The gap stretches from a short while before you were knocked out, to some time afterwards. You will probably never be able to remember this time, but this is nothing to worry about. Each night you have a memory gap for the time that you were asleep and this is almost the same kind of memory gap you have had after your accidental sleep.

The only difference is the short blank period for the time before the accident. This happens because it seems to take a little time for your brain to change the things you see, hear and feel into memories.

The bang on the head that put your brain to sleep stopped these memories being made.

In the next section we have listed some of the ways your sleepy brain may affect you. First though, there are three important things you should remember about concussion.

**1. ANY UNPLEASANT EFFECTS ARE ONLY TEMPORARY.**

All you need to do is wait until you wake up completely and they will no longer be a problem.

**2. THESE EFFECTS HAPPEN BECAUSE YOU HAVE A SLEEPY BRAIN, NOT BECAUSE YOU HAVE “BRAIN DAMAGE”.**

Many people have the same sort of problems after concussion, but when they have recovered they have the same skills and capabilities that they had before the accident.

**3. The effects of a sleepy brain are natural and normal.**

If you have ever tried to work after going without sleep for a couple of nights you will have some idea of what to expect. The only difference is that one good nights sleep probably gave your brain back the energy it needed. After concussion you may need longer than this to get fully charged again.

## 2 THE WAKING UP TIME

### WHAT TO DO ABOUT:

**TIREDNESS:** At first, even a little effort may make you feel very tired. Your brain has less energy to spare than it normally does, and when you have used this up you need to give your brain a chance to get recharged. If you feel sleepy, go to bed. You will probably find that you need several hours more sleep than you usually do. Don't wait for the clock to tell you when you should go to bed. Let your brain tell you when it needs to sleep, even if it is in the middle of the day.

**FORGETTING THINGS:** You cannot expect your sleepy brain to be as good at remembering things as it usually is. Don't worry if you can't think of a name or a phone number that you ought to know, or if you go to get something and you can't remember what it is. Maybe your memory is as bad now as your grandfather's. old age has made his memory sleepy, but your memory is only going to be a problem until you wake up completely. In the meantime, get your family and friends to remind you of important dates and appointments, or write things down.

**CLUMSINESS:** You may find when you are first waking up after your accidental sleep that you are a bit more clumsy than usual. Don't worry if you do find that you are a bit unsteady on your feet, or bump into furniture or maybe drop things. Just take everything you do a little more slowly. Your brain is the control centre for your whole body. It needs to make

sense out of all the messages coming in from your eyes, ears and other senses, in order to send the right signals to the right muscles to enable you to do anything. So give your sleepy brain more time to do all the work it needs to do, to let you do it properly. It is a good idea to give your brain practice in getting signals through quickly again. Games like table tennis, snooker and exercises like skipping will help.

**POOR CONCENTRATION:** No one can concentrate well when they are tired, so it is not surprising that many people have trouble concentrating for a while after they have been knocked out. Maybe you cannot even concentrate well enough to read the newspaper. Leave it for today. The news will still be around tomorrow, when you will be better able to cope. And, if you really need to just read for a short time, then come back to it when you have had a break to recharge your batteries. The same thing applies to other areas where concentration is needed. You would not attempt to solve a problem or to make an important decision when you were so tired that you just needed to sleep. Leave everything that has to have your complete concentration until your brain has had a chance to wake up properly.

**IRRITABILITY:** Some people who have been concussed find that they get annoyed easily by things that normally would not upset them. This does not last very long, but it can be difficult for you and your family. It happens because the brain controls your emotional system as well as the rest of your body. When waking up after you accidentally sleep your emotions may not be as well controlled as they usually are. There are several ways to deal with this. Some people find that going out of a room, or away from a situation as soon as

it begins to get annoying is enough. Others use relaxation techniques to help them get back on an even keel. You may find that you can stop the irritability developing by using up energy with something like hitting a punch bag, riding an exercycle or skipping hard for a while.

**NOISE PROBLEMS:** When you want to shut out something you don't want to look at, all you have to do is close your eyes. When your brain is fully awake it uses part of its energy to damp down noises that would interfere with what you are doing. After concussion your brain may not have enough energy spare to do this and you may find that most noises bother you. Again, you will find that this will not last very long. In the meantime, explain to your family and friends and ask them to keep the noise level down if they can. If you have a very young family who could not be expected to understand, it would be more comfortable for everyone if they can have a few days holiday away, with perhaps, obliging friends or grandparents.

**EYE PROBLEMS:** If this occurs, there may be either trouble focusing, so that things look blurred or double, or you may find that your eyes are sensitive to bright light. Double vision and needing to wear dark glasses on strong light, should both clear up within a few days. If you wear glasses, do not go back to your optician to have them changed until you have fully recovered from your concussion. It is probably not your eye sight that has changed, but that your sleepy brain is not putting together the messages from each eye as well as it normally does.

**HEADACHES:** Not everyone has headaches after being knocked out. When they do happen they can have many different causes. Two common ones are fatigue and stress. Fatigue headaches are signals that you need to sleep and doing that will get rid of the headache. Stress headaches are also signals. They happen when you are asking your brain to use more energy than it has. For example, by concentrating for longer than you are able to. Again, sleep should relieve the headache, or you may only need to stop what you are doing and change to something more relaxing. If the headache gets worse and cannot be relieved, see your doctor.

**DIZZINESS:** Occasionally, people find that they get a giddy feeling if they move or change their position quickly. Usually it is only a problem for a day or two. If you find that things seem to spin around if you sit up suddenly after lying down, or if you turn your head sharply, the only way to cope to avoid such sudden movements or changes in position until it clears. If dizziness persists for more than a week or two, see your doctor.

## **THE WAKING UP TIME -**

### **WHAT NOT TO DO**

#### **DO NOT**



go to bed and stay in bed until you are better. You need sleep at this stage, but also need to give your brain enough to do to help it wake up.

#### **DO NOT**



expect your sleepy brain to deal with alcohol in the normal way. The effect of alcohol is very similar to the effect of concussion, and after concussion drink is more likely to knock you out again rather than pep you up.

#### **DO NOT**



drive your car or motor-bike until you have made sure that your concentration is good enough that you can react quickly enough to handle unexpected hazards, and that your ability to judge distances is back to normal.

#### **DO NOT**



put yourself in a position where you are likely to get another bang on the head. Leave off activities such as football and skateboarding where you might get knocked out again – at least until you have woken up completely from this accident.

### 3 GETTING BACK TO WORK

When you should go back to work depends as much on the kind of job you do as on the stage you are at in your recovery. Obviously if you work in a noisy factory and you are still bothered by noise, you will not be able to do your job very well. And if you work in a busy office you will need to be more alert, more able to concentrate and to handle things quickly and efficiently. However, if the office is fairly quiet you can just keep to routine tasks until you have fully recovered.

When you are over the early effects of double vision and dizziness and do not have persistent headaches, then you are probably ready to start work, **PROVIDED** that your job is something you can handle at this stage. It is sensible to begin by only working part of the day when you first start back. You may be able to work well for two or three hours. After this, once you start getting tired and getting less efficient, it will be better for your employer and for you, if you go home to rest and recover so that you are able to work the next day. You may still find that you are a bit more tired than usual after work, and that you still need more sleep than you used to. This will gradually improve and you should be almost back to your normal routine.

### 4 WHEN TO SEEK HELP

We have described some of the effects of concussion and the average times you might expect it to last. Not everyone has the same kind of injury, or the same kind of head, so, if your recovery is not following the same kind of pattern, you may need extra help to get over the accident.

**IF YOU ARE STILL BOTHERED BY ANY OF THESE EFFECTS OF CONCUSSION FOURTEEN DAYS AFTER THE ACCIDENT, AND WOULD LIKE ADVICE OR ASSISTANCE, SEE YOUR OWN DOCTOR.**

### 5 SPORT

When you should resume sport depends on what you play and how you feel. Keep fit exercises and jogging can start as soon as you are over the early stages of dizziness, headaches and tiredness. You will probably need to take things more easily at first and you may take a little time to get back to your former speed and skill. Avoid overtiring yourself to begin with. If you climb, drive or fly, make very certain your reaction time is back to normal and that you are really fit again. If you play a sport which exposes you to concussion (e.g. rugby) do not play again for at least 3 weeks. Two concussions a short time apart can cause serious complications.