

How to know if a head injury is a concussion, when to call a doctor

October 15 2010, By Keith Herrell



Concussion has become a high-profile injury, with weekly media reports of star athletes knocked out of action for anywhere from a few moments to the remainder of their careers.

Anyone, of course, can have a [concussion](#), which is more likely to result from an accidental fall at home or an automobile accident than from a vicious tackle by an onrushing defensive lineman.

But no matter the cause, says UC Health physician Sheital Bavishi, DO, a specialist in [traumatic brain injury](#), it's important to know when to see a doctor if you've experienced a head injury.

Simply put, a concussion is a brain injury caused by a sudden blow to the head or a blow to the body that causes the head and brain to move

quickly back and forth. Each year, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an estimated 1.7 million people in the United States sustain a traumatic brain injury, of which about 75 percent are concussions.

So how do you know if you've had a concussion?

Usually, the determining factors involve at least some alteration of consciousness, says Bavishi, an assistant professor in the department of physical medicine and rehabilitation at the University of Cincinnati (UC). "You might feel rattled, or have some decreased memory of the event or of things surrounding the event," she says. "Or you might actually lose consciousness for anywhere from a few seconds to an extended period of time."

Symptoms could also include headaches, blurred vision, vomiting and dizziness, Bavishi says.

Concussions are graded on a three-point scale, ranging from Grade 1 (temporary confusion but no loss of consciousness) to Grade 3 (loss of consciousness). Grade 2 concussion symptoms last longer than grade 1 symptoms, but there is still no loss of consciousness.

"With mild [head injuries](#) or mild concussions that involve no loss of consciousness, 90 percent of them will get better on their own," says Bavishi. "Only in very rare cases do symptoms last longer than three months."

If symptoms do last for an extended period of time, Bavishi says, the victim has lost consciousness or it is a second head injury, a doctor should be consulted. In some cases, the patient might need a CT scan to check for serious brain injury such as bleeding.

Athletes who suffered a head injury and wish to return to their sport should also consult a doctor, says Bavishi, who notes that concussions can have a cumulative effect.

"Usually, the closer together they are the worse it is," Bavishi says. "So if you've had a concussion and you have a second one soon after, then it could be a worse outcome with more chronic [symptoms](#)."

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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