7 Common Myths About Concussions — and the Facts You Need to Know

Concussions are getting a great deal of attention, and for good reason. But there are still plenty of myths out there too.

Concussions can be one of the scariest injuries to handle, especially for young athletes whose brains are still developing.

Although the issue has gotten more attention in the past few years, and led to some better strategies for contact sports, there are still many misconceptions out there that people need to know to stay healthy.

Here are seven common myths, and the real facts you need to know:

1. **MYTH: CONCUSSIONS HAPPEN AS A RESULT OF CRACKING YOUR SKULL.**
   
   **Fact:** A fracture can be involved in an injury or accident, but that would occur apart from a concussion, which happens when the brain moves inside the skull. This is often a result of a violent event like a car accident, direct hit to head, sudden fall, or aggressive shaking of the head and body.

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   Athletes in contact sports like boxing and football are particularly prone to concussions because they risk multiple blows during both practice and matches/games. But they can happen in any sport, and also in everyday life. A fall from a ladder, smacking your head on a low-hanging branch, or getting hit by a ball can all cause concussions. There have even been studies showing associations between brain injury and certain types of roller coasters.

2. **MYTH: YOU CAN BE DIAGNOSED WITH A CONCUSSION THROUGH A CT SCAN.**
   
   **Fact:** Unfortunately, detecting a concussion isn’t as simple as sending you to the imaging department at the local hospital. Although imaging can be an important step in ruling out more serious brain injury such as bleeding or swelling, a concussion does not typically involve structural damage to the brain, therefore does not show up on scans. Unless you have cuts or bruises on your head or face, there may be no visible signs of injury at all.
Diagnosing a concussion is a matter of looking at the symptoms. Symptoms can include memory loss—particularly before and just after a concussive event—difficulty concentrating, “brain fog,” irritability, slowed reaction time, nausea, and headaches. Other common symptoms include dizziness, balance problems, visual disturbance, sensitivity to light/sound and disruption of normal sleep patterns (too much or too little).

Some people may have all of these, but most people have just a few, making it more challenging to detect a concussion unless a clearly dangerous incident recently occurred.

3. MYTH: CONCUSSIONS ALWAYS CAUSE LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS.

Fact: This can sometimes happen, but there are definitely many concussions that don’t cause people to pass out.

Loss of consciousness, while scary, is actually helpful for determining that a concussion probably occurred. In other cases, people may not have that dramatic moment and will have to rely on symptom identification instead. However, loss of consciousness is not related to the severity of the concussion sustained or the risk for prolonged symptoms.

4. MYTH: EVERYONE RECOVERS FROM A CONCUSSION AT ABOUT THE SAME RATE.

Fact: Concussions, like any injury, can have a varying degree of symptoms and a variety of factors that affect recovery. Such factors include severity of injury, age, gender, history of migraines and or motion sickness, and history of past concussions.

When you add that together with an individualized healing response, it means that concussion recovery timeframes are on a case-by-case basis. Recovery time varies, but the majority of concussions heal and have symptom resolution in about 3-4 weeks.

5. MYTH: CHILDREN RECOVER FROM CONCUSSIONS FASTER.

Fact: The opposite is true. Because their brains are still developing and require more energy than adult brains, children need more time to heal.

The Mayo Clinic advises that children who return to school after a concussion may require some classroom adjustments like a lighter homework load or a shortened school day. The Mayo also notes that children can develop complications if they return to sports too soon.

One danger for both kids and adults is a secondary concussion before the first has healed—that can prolong symptoms, and in some cases, cause more permanent damage.

6. MYTH: THERE ARE MANY STRATEGIES THAT CAN PREVENT CONCUSSIONS.

Fact: If only that were true, it would be a huge relief. But unfortunately, there are few things you can do to fully prevent concussions. Wearing helmets in a sport helps, but isn’t a guarantee. Similarly, some studies have shown neck strengthening can be helpful, but also isn’t a surefire way to stop concussions.

However, there has been some success in team sports, especially with kids and teens, when programs emphasize good sportsmanship. This reduces the risk of unnecessary roughness, and can lower the number of head injuries. New rules and regulations, regarding return to play after a concussion may be more effective in preventing more serious injury such as second impact syndrome. A second concussion before original injury has healed can lead to protracted symptoms or worse—second impact syndrome is rare, but can be fatal.
7. MYTH: YOU HEAL FASTER FROM A COMBINATION OF THERAPY AND MEDICATIONS.

**Fact:** Management of concussion is a complex and multidisciplinary approach, key players include MD, PT, athletic trainers, coaches, parents and teachers, all are important in the recovery of a concussion.

The standard advice up until very recently was to get total physical and cognitive rest, but there’s been some research from prominent experts noting that an approach like that may lead to emotional distress like anxiety. Instead, the sooner you can begin to integrate everyday activity back into your schedule, the easier your recovery will be.

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That doesn’t mean going full force, though. Exertion should be gradual and gentle, with the understanding that your brain is working on healing. You wouldn’t run a marathon on a broken leg (we hope!), so don’t try to solve calculus problems or load up your work meeting schedule.

Fortunately, healing does happen. While it’s true that concussions can be a significant concern, especially for those who’ve experienced more than one, the majority of concussions don’t cause long-term damage. With awareness of how they might occur, and especially with recognition of the symptoms following a concussive event, most people can recover fully and suffer no long-term effects.

However, that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be evaluated by a professional and then monitored under his or her care. It’s vital to track symptoms and bring in specialists if needed in order to make sure that a concussion isn’t lingering long past the initial injury. A physical therapist can help with a variety of concussion symptoms such as vestibular/balance and gaze stability, headache management and education on general management techniques. Your physical therapist can also help serve as a liason between return to sport/activity/school.

If you’re suffering from any combination of the typical symptoms of a concussion—particularly after an injury or accident in which your head was affected—then it’s best to seek medical advice and enlist the help of healthcare professionals.

**Did you know you can contact Viverant without a doctor referral to schedule an appointment regarding physical therapy and other services that may help you? Visit Viverant.com to learn more.**