

Concussions

By: Dr. Stephen O'Neil

A common injury during the winter months is the concussion. It occurs during the icy weather from car accidents, slip and fall accidents, and our favourite sport, hockey. A concussion occurs when someone hits their head. The brain which is made up of soft tissue and floats inside the skull in cerebrospinal fluid, gets banged against the inside of the skull causing bruising, breaking of blood vessels and damage to the nerves. When the brain is traumatized in this way, there is a temporary loss of normal brain function. The repercussions from this can range from mild to very severe.

Some symptoms of a concussion are loss on consciousness, memory loss, headache, dizziness, confusion, pressure in the head, balance problems. If a person experiences any of these symptoms after a head trauma of some sort, they most likely have a concussion. There are three degrees of concussion. In a grade I concussion the person will have some of the above symptoms but they will completely resolve within 15 minutes after the trauma. A Grade II concussion will show signs as in a grade I but the symptoms will persist for longer than 15 minutes. A grade III concussion is when a person loses consciousness, even if it only for a few seconds. If any symptoms persist for more than a few weeks, the person likely has post concussion syndrome which can be as mild as headaches and irritability or as debilitating as constant nausea, migraines, lethargy, and depression.

In the event someone suffers a concussion they should be evaluated by a qualified professional such as a chiropractor, medical doctor, or trained certified sports trainer. The first 48 hours after a concussion are the most important and the person should be monitored closely. Any change in symptoms such as confusion or nonsensical talk, vomiting, or any other symptoms which worsen could indicate more serious damage in the brain. After a head trauma the person should avoid taking any medication or alcohol which might thin the blood as this could cause further damage to the brain. The person should also be awoken from sleep at intervals the first night after a concussion to make sure they are functioning normally. Any change for the worse would warrant an emergency room visit and possibly some more advanced cranial imaging techniques.

After a concussion the brain needs adequate time to heal. The length of time needed depends not only on the severity of the concussion, but also on how the individual responds. This can vary greatly from person to person. It is important to wait until ALL symptoms from a concussion have cleared before returning to the activity or other activities that put the patient at risk for another head injury. A second impact while the brain is still inflamed could cause severe and permanent brain or neurological damage in some cases even death. Concussions are not something to be shrugged off or taken lightly. They are serious injuries with potentially serious ramifications. Physicians should always error on the side of caution when evaluating a concussion patient.

Concussion prevention has gained much more attention in recent years since the latest research indicates how serious it can be. Innovations in helmets and other protective gear have come a long way, as well as making mouth guards mandatory for many sports have reduced the incidence of concussion. Some sports have adapted new rules and regulations on unsafe play as well as stiffer penalties for head related infractions. Prevention of these injuries should be a priority to ensure the safety of our athletes. Be sure to see your Chiropractor or MD if you or someone you know sustains a concussion for a full evaluation.