Returning to sport for adults following a mild head injury

Information for patients, carers and their families

Most people recover rapidly following a mild head injury. A few people may suffer from symptoms over a longer period. There is a small risk of you developing serious complications so you should be watched closely by another adult for 24 hours after the accident.

It is important to have a gradual return to sport/play in order to:

- Protect the brain and allow it time to heal
- Reduce the severity and length of time symptoms persist
- Reduce the risk of a second head injury while the brain is vulnerable. A second impact may cause further damage or increase previous symptoms
- Once you feel better and after about 72 hours, some low intensity exercise can begin as per the table below.

Grading your return to sport/play:

- Do get lots of rest; both physical and cognitive rest until concussion symptoms are resolved
- Do inform family members, coaches or trainers about your injury and graded return to sport. Provide them with the Minor Head Injury handout so they are aware of the warning signs
- Do not start sport or exercise until medical clearance by a doctor
- Do not participate in any high risk activities (e.g. riding a bike, sports etc.) immediately after injury
- If in doubt, sit it out!

Recommended graded return to sport/physical activity

When moving through each stage, monitor how you are feeling and only progress to the next stage if no symptoms have occurred. If symptoms occur, rest and contact your GP, once medically cleared restart at the prior level of activity where no symptoms were experienced. Progression of exercise challenge can occur every 24 hours.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graded return to activity</th>
<th>Exercise for each stage of rehabilitation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. No activity</td>
<td>Complete physical and cognitive rest until feeling better (about 72 hours post injury)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Low levels of physical activity</td>
<td>Walking or stationary cycling keeping intensity less than 70% maximum heart rate No resistance training e.g. running, weights, jumping</td>
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<td>3. Sport specific exercise</td>
<td>Running drills in sport, no head impact activities, limited body and head movement</td>
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Factsheet

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<td>4. Non contact training drills</td>
<td>Progression to more complex training drills e.g. passing drills in football, may start load progressive resistance training</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Full contact practice</td>
<td>Following medical clearance participate in normal training activities with supervision e.g. road cycling</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Return to play</td>
<td>Normal game play</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As per the ‘mild head injury’ factsheet, if any warning signs are present cease activity and seek immediate medical attention

References and further information


https://www.headway.org.uk/about-brain-injury/individuals/information-library/

Concussion and mild head injury Practical neurology 2006; 6: 342-357
Tim Anderson, Marcus Heitger, A D Macleod

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