



**March is
Brain Injury
Awareness Month.
Learn how to
prevent and spot a
concussion and
help your child
heal from one.**

Your Concussion Questions **ANSWERED**

BY JENNIFER MARINO WALTERS

When parents think about sports-related concussions, they often think of football. But in reality, other popular youth sports—soccer, lacrosse, volleyball and even baseball—can put kids at risk for brain injury. And spring is the season that many of these sports start back up.

As parents prepare to send their kids back onto the field, Dr. Melissa Womble, neuropsychologist and director of the Inova Sports Medicine Concussion Program in Fairfax, answers their biggest questions about youth concussions and how to prevent them.

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What is a concussion?

A concussion is a brain injury that can occur when someone receives a blow to the head or a hit to the body that causes the brain to bounce around in the skull. This can create chemical changes in the brain or stretch and damage brain cells, causing a temporary disruption in normal brain function.

According to a 2016 study published in “Pediatrics,” the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, 1.1 to 1.9 million sports- and recreation-related concussions occur each year in children age 18 and younger.

What are the signs and symptoms of concussion?

The most common immediate symptoms of concussion are headaches, nausea, confusion, visual changes and dizziness.

“Dizziness is one of the symptoms that can lead to a prolonged recovery,” says Womble. “So if your child is reporting dizziness, he or she needs to be evaluated.”

But symptoms won’t always show up right away. “Generally, symptoms can present up to 72 hours after injury,” Dr. Womble says.

Where should I take my child to be evaluated?

If your child has an excruciating headache with nausea and vomiting, is acting very confused or differently than normal, or has significant emotional changes, take her to the emergency room. They’ll likely need a CT scan to rule out a more significant injury like a brain bleed, which is rare.

Otherwise, Womble recommends following up with your child’s pediatrician or a concussion clinic three days after the injury.

How are concussions treated?

Most concussions can be managed at home. On the first night, Womble says to let your child get a full night’s sleep. “It’s an old wives’ tale to wake your child up every hour. Kids need good sleep after an injury,” she says.

After the initial 24 hours, she says, “We want to start getting kids back on their normal schedule with breaks and certain restrictions.” It is especially important for kids recovering from a concussion to stay hydrated and to eat well.

Some children, however, may need additional therapy. Kids with a lot of dizziness may require vestibular therapy, for example, while those with vision changes might need vision therapy.

How long will it take my child to recover?

“General recovery from concussion is about one to four weeks,” says Womble. “But there can be cases that are more prolonged. A lot of

it has to do with genetic risk factors.”

For example, children with a history of migraines, anxiety or depression can take longer to recover from concussion.

How will the doctor know when my child is recovered and can return to play?

Your doctor will do a battery of tests to assess your child’s verbal and visual memory, processing speed and reaction time, and to make sure their vestibular and ocular motor systems appear normal. The doctor will also want to see that your child is asymptomatic while resting and during physical and cognitive activity. Once your child meets those milestones, they’ll likely be cleared to return to their sport.

Can concussions cause long-term effects?

Though there’s still a lot of research to be done on that, concussions are considered treatable, and multiple concussions don’t necessarily put kids at risk for long-term effects. What can put them at risk, though, is not properly managing and treating the concussion.

“A lot of parents push to get kids back in the game sooner than they need to,” Womble says. “Then the kid can be injured again really quickly.”

How can parents help prevent concussion in kids?

Concussion prevention goes beyond making sure your child wears protective equipment such as helmets and face shields.

“One of the most important ways to keep kids safe is to make sure they have good form and technique,” says Womble. “The coaches should make sure kids are working on those areas, but parents should also help make sure their kids are in good physical shape to be able to engage in sports the right way.”

This includes making sure kids stay well hydrated and eat healthfully and regularly, especially when routines change, such as during travel tournaments.

Despite the concussion risk, Dr. Womble says it’s important not to prevent your child from playing sports. The physical, cognitive and social benefits are far too great. But knowing the signs and symptoms of concussion—and what to do if your child gets one—will help them fully recover and get back in the game. ■

