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# What's the Deal with ... Concussions

Article By: Kyle Stack

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## Expand your mind to understand more about a mysterious injury

Concussions are a hot-button topic in sports health, with professional football and hockey players serving as living evidence of the injury's dangerous repercussions.

To help you better understand the symptoms, myths, treatment and preventive measures that go along with concussions, we spoke with Dr. Christopher Giza, MD, associate

professor of pediatric neurology and neurosurgery at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, and Dr. Daryl Rosenbaum, MD, director of sports medicine fellowship at Wake Forest University School of Medicine.

Together, they explain why you should think a little more clearly about an injury that doesn't require you to get knocked out.

### Definition and symptoms

Rosenbaum describes a concussion as "an injury to the brain caused by trauma, which can be directed to the head or elsewhere on the body, causing the brain to shake inside the skull."

**"A concussion can happen without you being knocked out."**

Since a concussion is not a visible injury, it can be tough for people to realize when they have one. Rosenbaum says that symptoms are wide-ranging, including headache, dizziness, vision trouble, nausea, sensitivity to light, balance issues, emotional difficulties such as irritability and loss of consciousness. Giza adds that memory disturbance and confusion are other notable signals. Still, headaches are most prevalent.

"Headaches occur in 85 to 90 percent of concussions," Giza says.

### Treatment

If you think you may have concussed yourself, a trip to the doctor should be your first course of treatment, as he/she can identify symptoms you might not recognize. As is the case with any head injury, a gradual return to normal physical activity is optimal.

Rosenbaum has an easy saying to remember: "When in doubt, sit them out." In other words, if there is any reason to believe you might have a concussion, it's paramount to cycle through all possible symptoms before

### Myths

There are plenty of myths regarding concussions. Here are three:

**You must lose consciousness to have a concussion.**

"Brain physiology changes after a concussion even if the individual wasn't unconscious," Giza says, meaning that being disoriented could even be a concussion signal. Rosenbaum puts it a different way: "A concussion can happen without you being knocked out."

**Helmets prevent concussions.**

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considering a return to the playing field.

Too much activity before a full recovery can actually exacerbate the injury, according to Giza and Rosenbaum. Giza explains that exercise raises blood pressure, which can cause headaches or make concussion symptoms worse.

There is another reason to ensure full recovery. Giza cautions that since brain activity is altered following a concussion, reaction time can be temporarily compromised. If you insist on continuing to play in your basketball or flag football league before all concussion symptoms subside, you're putting yourself at risk for potentially not reacting to a play the way you would if fully healthy.

### Prevention

There isn't a full guarantee against a concussion, especially if you play a contact sport such as football, hockey or rugby. But there are steps you can take to ensure you reduce the chances of injury as much as possible.

Use all the protective gear that's recommended for your sport, and make sure you know how to use it. Wear a helmet that properly fits your head. Consider wearing a fitted mouth guard, which, along with protecting your teeth, can possibly reduce the likelihood of a concussion.

Rosenbaum warns against "heading" the ball in soccer until you've learned proper technique. That goes for any other sport-specific drill. Understand the appropriate technique before trying it.

It's natural for most athletes of any skill level to want to tough it out through an injury. However, your skull deserves a special type of treatment to ensure optimal health.

### About the Writer

Kyle Stack is a New York-based freelance reporter who has written for MLB.com, SI.com and ESPN the Magazine.

Rosenbaum points out that helmets were originally designed to protect the noggin from a skull fracture or soft tissue damage. Wearing a helmet doesn't mean your brain can't still rattle around in the skull, so don't assume you can take greater physical risks just because your head is protected.

#### **There is no cumulative effect from multiple concussions.**

Not so, says Giza. "There's growing evidence to suggest that when you get your first concussion, the risk of another concussion within the same sports season is three times higher," Giza explains. While some might be genetically predisposed to increased concussion risk, others could have an aggressive style of play that leads to more susceptibility.

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