

Head Injury

Advice for Parents and Caregivers



Emergency Department

4480 Oak Street, Vancouver, BC V6H 3V4

604-875-2345 • 1-888-300-3088

www.bcchildrens.ca

Your child has injured his or her head.

Our medical team has found no signs of a serious brain injury. We believe it is safe for your child to go home in your care. It is important to check your child carefully for the next 24-72 hours. Parents know their child best so they are best at noticing unusual behaviour in their child.

Let your child sleep if she wants to. Sleep is good for your child but it is important to **check** your child for the next 24-72 hours.

Checking your child over the next 72 hours:

Make sure your child:

- ▶ knows his name
- ▶ knows who you are
- ▶ knows where she is
- ▶ wakes up as easily as usual
- ▶ can hold your hand tight with both hands
- ▶ has no blood or fluids in ears or nose
- ▶ is breathing easily
- ▶ isn't feeling a lot of pain



If you are worried about any of these signs, bring your child back to the Emergency Department.

When your child is up, see if your child:

- ▶ loses balance or falls often
- ▶ loses strength in an arm or leg – drops things, trips
- ▶ can't see clearly - blurred or double vision
- ▶ has any unusual movements or body jerks and twitches. (convulsions)



If you see any of the above signs, call 911 and **come back to the Emergency Department.**



Bring your child back to the Emergency if your child:

- ▶ vomits more than 1 or 2 times (once or twice is common and expected).
- ▶ has a headache that gets worse or does not get better even with pain medicine.
- ▶ is restless, irritable, or confused.
- ▶ can no longer do things he could do before the injury.
- ▶ has no energy or wish to do anything.
- ▶ is different from his or her usual self.
- ▶ is very young and
 - cannot be comforted or quieted.
 - will not nurse or eat.

Trust your gut feeling about your child. Some signs of a brain injury are changes that only someone who knows a child well might notice.

Caring for your child in the first 24 hours at home:

- ▶ You can give acetaminophen (Tylenol) for a mild headache. Do not give sedatives or stronger pain medicines. They may cover up some important signs of injury. If simple pain medications do not help, call your doctor.
- ▶ Your child may feel sick to the stomach for a few days. Give small snacks and drinks rather than big meals.
- ▶ Keep your child where you can watch him. Until he is feeling well again, read or play quietly with your child. Don't allow rough games. Both physical and mental rest is important.

Caring for your child in the next days, weeks, and months

Some effects of a brain injury take longer to show. Here are some your child may have in the weeks and months after a brain injury.



Go to your family doctor if your child has any of the following:

1. Your child may have some of these **physical effects**:
 - headaches
 - tired all the time
 - loses balance
 - seems clumsy, drops things or trips a lot
 - feels dizzy or have nausea
 - sleeps poorly or sleep more than usual
 - changes eating patterns
 - doesn't see or hear as well
 - is sensitive to light or noise
2. Your child may have some **cognitive effects** (thinking):
 - Problems thinking clearly –may get mixed up about when, where,
 - Hard to remember things
 - Hard to pay attention or concentrate
 - Problems getting organized or doing school work
 - Has trouble solving a problem or making a good decision
3. Your child may have some **social or behavioral effects**:
 - moody - sad, anxious, irritable or angry
 - not want to do anything
 - act different than normal
 - seems immature
 - acts without thinking, impulsive
 - has trouble getting along with peers

It can be hard to recognize signs in infants or young children. But you might notice if your young child:

- ▶ is cranky, irritable
- ▶ changes his sleeping or eating or playing patterns
- ▶ is not interested in her favourite toys or activity
- ▶ forgets a new skill, such as toilet training

Head Injury - helping your child recover

Each brain injury is different and so is the recovery. Most improve, but sometimes it takes a long time. Your child may have signs that last for days, months or even longer. The time it takes to get better will depend on:

- ▶ how serious the injury is
- ▶ what part of the brain is injured

- ▶ if your child has had another brain injury

Tips for helping your child recover:

- ▶ The brain needs rest to heal. Make sure your child gets plenty of sleep at night and rest periods during the day.
- ▶ Make sure your child returns to normal activities gradually, not all at once.
- ▶ Limit noise and stimulation (e.g. television, video games, loud music).
- ▶ Try to do one thing at a time so your child does not get distracted.
- ▶ Write notes. Use a calendar to help your child remember things.
- ▶ Let older children know that drugs and alcohol are bad for the recovering brain.
- ▶ Talk about the injury with others who know your child. They need to understand what has happened so they can help. Share information with family members, friends, teachers, counsellors, babysitters, coaches, etc.
- ▶ Ask your family doctor about resources in your community that can help with recovering from a brain injury.

Helping your child return to school:

You may be wondering when your child should return to school. A lot depends on how serious the injury is and how your child is recovering. A child who is close to normal might return to school as soon as you both feel ready.

Sometimes it takes more time to get better. If so, contact the principal or teachers to give them time to prepare for your child's return. You may want to meet with the classroom teacher and resource room teacher to discuss your child's injury and return to school.

Here are some ways to make your child's return to school as successful as possible.

- ▶ Return to school gradually. Start with a few hours per day. Lower the amount of work expected. Then, slowly increase time and workload.
- ▶ Talk to the teacher about what school activities are okay until recovery is complete.
- ▶ Find out if there is material your child needs to relearn.

- ▶ Don't expect too much. Your child may perform at a different level than before and this might take time to improve.
- ▶ The brain injury may effect your child's concentration, mood or behavior. It's important to communicate with school staff to keep track of changes.

If you are concerned about your child's return to school or the struggles your child is having at school, you can contact a resource teacher at the BC Brain Injury Association at www.bcbraininjuryassociation.com or 604-465-1783 or 1-877-858-1788. They have experience helping parents and teachers of children with brain injuries succeed at school.

Tips for the School

Let the teachers know your child:

- ▶ may tire easily and need rest breaks.
- ▶ need a quieter place to work with as few distractions as possible
- ▶ find it hard to copy work down or take notes
- ▶ have problems concentrating and need to:
 - sit at the front of the class
 - do tests in separate room
 - have step by step instructions
- ▶ may have problems remembering and need the teacher to:
 - repeat explanations and instructions
 - show how to do new tasks
 - use simple instructions
 - give a short summary of information regularly
 - use checklists, post-it notes and other visual reminders
 - write down all information to be learned
 - review often
- ▶ may need help with organizing school work such as:
 - a schedule that does not change
 - outlines, coloured dividers or folders and other ways to keep work and notebooks organized
- ▶ needs to have positive learning experiences
- ▶ may have trouble working when tired, stressed, over stimulated or with new activities

Helping your child return to activities and sports

Children are often eager to get back to their usual activities and sports. We know that taking part in those activities is positive and healthy, but it is important to be very careful. After a brain injury, the chances of having a second injury are greater. And with even another mild injury, a child's symptoms will get much worse.

After the signs of the brain injury start to improve, your child can do some light aerobic exercise like walking, riding a stationary bike, or swimming. These activities should be supervised and increased little by little if your child feels okay.

Stay away from activities that might cause another head injury. That includes contact sports or other sports where there is risk of getting hit on the head (eg. Football, Hockey, Soccer, Skiing, Snow Boarding, Skate Boarding, Roller Blading etc. For more information on returning to sports after a brain injury, visit the website at www.thinkfirst.ca under "Safety Info". But, it is very important to always first check with your doctor before returning to sports after a brain injury.

At BC Children's Hospital, you are an important member of your child's health care team. Please ask questions so you understand and can be part of decisions about your child's care and treatment.

It's good to ask!