Sport Concussion in New Zealand: ACC National Guidelines

January 2015

Developed with our partners:
This guideline document has been produced to inform National Sports Organisations (NSOs), and recreation, education and health sectors in their development of specific policy for concussion in sport. Produced by ACC in consultation with a panel of medical, sport and research experts, it is based on the 2012 Zurich Consensus Statement[1] on Sport Concussion.

These guidelines are intended to help provide advice via the NSOs and recreation, education and health sectors to help people (e.g. medical doctors, health providers, first aiders, coaches/trainers, players, parents, sports administrators, school teachers etc.) to understand:

1. Why there is a need for concussion guidelines.
2. What concussion is.
3. How to recognise the signs and symptoms of concussion.
4. What action to take when a concussion occurs, and how to get help.
5. Who can assess and diagnose concussion (only a medical doctor).
6. Why a management protocol for graduated return to school/work/sport is needed.
7. How NSO’s can develop a concussion policy and implementation plan.
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Guideline Summary

- **Recognise and Remove.** If concussion is suspected, remove from play/activity immediately and seek urgent assessment by a medical doctor.
- Concussions often occur **without** loss of consciousness (only 10-20% lose consciousness).
- Extra caution is required for child and adolescent athletes.
- It may take several hours (or even days) post injury for some or all of the symptoms of concussion to emerge.
- Non-medical personnel have an important role to play in recognising the signs and symptoms of concussion. Concussion can present in a similar manner to other catastrophic conditions with delayed onset of symptoms.
- A medical doctor must provide assessment and diagnosis of concussion because the diagnosis may be difficult and relies on clinical judgement.
- It is unanimously agreed that **no return** to sport/activity on the day of concussive injury should occur.\(^\text{[1]}\)
- The effects of concussion can interfere with the athlete’s ability to learn in the classroom or to function well at work. Return to school/work may need to be graduated and demands altered to reflect level of function, guided by a medical practitioner experienced in this area. Return to school/work and social activities should be achieved before return to sport/activity.
1. Why we need concussion guidelines

Concussion is a serious injury and occurs frequently

- Estimated 35,000 head injuries in New Zealand per year.[2]
- 21% (7,350 injuries per year) of all head injuries in New Zealand are sustained through sport related activity.[1] ACC only receive claims for 6,250 of those sports related concussion injuries suggesting that 1,100 currently go untreated.
- 2009-2013 sports related concussion claims cost ACC $76 million.
- 46% (3,381 injuries per year) of sports head injuries are classified as ‘mild with a high risk of complications’. Injuries are most frequently sustained during rugby, cycling and equestrian activities.
- 11% of sports related concussion claimants had multiple concussions within a 2 year period (2009-2013).
- Evidence shows that with repeat concussion people may experience a decline in general health and quality of life up to 10 years following injury.[4]
2. Definition of concussion

Concussion is a mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI). Concussion is a brain injury defined as a complex pathophysiologic process affecting the brain, induced by biomechanical forces. Several common features that incorporate clinical, pathologic, and biomechanical injury constructs can be utilized in defining the nature of a concussive head injury.

A laymen’s definition of concussion is:

Concussion is a brain injury that can occur in any sport, particularly where there is full body contact. Concussion is caused by the impact of force (a blow) to a part of the body not necessarily the head directly.\(^1\)
3. Signs and symptoms of concussion

Concussion presents with a range of signs and/or symptoms that may or may not include loss of consciousness.\(^{[1]}\) It is important to remember that not every sign and symptom will be present every case and signs and symptoms may have delayed onset.

**Physical signs (you see)**

- Loss of consciousness or non-responsive
- Lying on the ground not moving or slow to get up
- Loss of balance/co-ordination
- Disorientation/confusion
- Visible injury to face or head (especially in combination with any other signs)
- Seizure or convulsion
- Vomiting

**Clinical symptoms (they feel)**

- Blurred vision
- Neck pain
- Nausea
- Dizziness
- Confusion
- Difficulty sleeping
- Headache/pressure in the head
- Sensitivity to light &/or noise
- Generally feeling “not quite right”
- Fatigue
- More emotional
- Irritability
- Problems with memory
- Reduced ability to think/concentrate
4. **Action to take when a concussion occurs, and how to get help**

When a concussion or possible concussion occurs it is important to take action and to get help. **The most important steps in the early identification of concussion are to recognise a possible injury and remove the athlete from the sport/activity.**

**Recognise and Remove**

**Use the Concussion Recognition Tool (CRT)**

(a printable PDF of the pocket CRT can be downloaded at: [http://links.lww.com/JSM/A32](http://links.lww.com/JSM/A32)).
• Non-medical personnel have an important role in observing possible concussion and its effects (e.g. behaviour/symptoms), and should take responsibility for removing the injured athlete from the sport/activity.
• If a suspected concussion has occurred it is important to see a medical doctor for assessment immediately.
• Medical doctors are available at general practitioner practices, concussion clinics or hospital emergency departments.
• It is unanimously agreed that no return to sport/activity on the day of concussive injury should occur.[1]
• In cases of uncertainty always adopt a conservative approach – “If in doubt sit them out”.

It is useful to have a list of local medical doctors, concussion clinics and emergency departments close to where the sport/activity is being played. A pre-activity checklist of the appropriate services could include:

• Local doctors or medical centre.
• Local hospital emergency department.
• Ambulance services (111).

To help an unconscious athlete:
• Apply first aid principles – DRABC (Danger, Response, Airway, Breathing, Circulation).
• It is extremely important to treat all unconscious athletes as though they have a neck injury.
• An unconscious athlete must ONLY be moved by a medical professional trained in spinal immobilisation techniques.
• Urgent hospital care is necessary if there is concern regarding the risk of structural head or neck injury – call 111.
• An athlete with any of the following should be referred to hospital URGENTLY:
  – Loss of consciousness or seizures.
  – Persistent confusion.
  – Deterioration after being injured – increased drowsiness, headache or vomiting.
• If at any time there is any doubt the athlete should be referred to hospital.
5. Assessment and diagnosis of concussion by medical doctors

Only a qualified medical doctor can assess and diagnose a concussion. Anyone with a suspected head injury needs to see and be assessed by a medical doctor. This is essential to confirm the diagnoses of concussion and to assess the risk for more serious injury.

We endorse the Sport Concussion Assessment Tool version 3 (SCAT3) and the Child-SCAT3 as a validated means of assessing concussion by a medical doctor. A printable PDF of SCAT3 can be downloaded at: http://links.lww.com/JSM/A30. A printable PDF of Child-SCAT3 can be downloaded at: http://links.lww.com/JSM/A31. We recommend you become familiar with symptoms evaluated in SCAT3.

The SCAT3 is NOT to be used for diagnosis of concussion alone. It provides a standardized assessment to aid diagnosis by a medical doctor.

NOTE: In some areas of the world, sports physiotherapists and other trained medical personnel can do the assessment (e.g., SCAT3), but only a doctor can diagnose concussion.
6. Concussion management and a graduated return to school/work/sport protocol

Initial concussion management involves physical and cognitive rest until the acute symptoms resolve and then a graded programme of exertion (physical and mental activity) prior to medical clearance and return to sport.

All athletes diagnosed with concussion must go through a graduated return to activity protocol led by a person trained in concussion management (e.g. coach, physical trainer, teacher, parent etc.). Athletes should have fully returned to school or work and social activities before returning to activity. Clearance by a medical doctor is required before return to sport/activity.

There is a lack of research to support the optimal period of time an athlete should be out of training and competition. Below is an example of a graduated return to sport protocol based on the best available evidence and expert experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Return to activity stage</th>
<th>Functional exercise at each stage of rehabilitation</th>
<th>Objective of each stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No activity</td>
<td>Avoid all physical and mental exertion including the use of technology (e.g. use of phones, computers, reading, watching TV).</td>
<td>Recovery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light aerobic exercise</td>
<td>Walking, swimming or stationary bike keep intensity of exercise very low/easy. No resistance training.</td>
<td>Increase heart rate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport specific exercise</td>
<td>Running drills. No head impact activities.</td>
<td>Add movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-contact training drills</td>
<td>Progression to more complex training drills e.g. passing, drills.</td>
<td>Exercise, co-ordination and cognitive load.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full contact practice</td>
<td>Following clearance from medical doctor, participate in normal training activities.</td>
<td>Restore confidence and assess functional skills by coaching staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return to play</td>
<td>Normal sport.</td>
<td>Full return to sport.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- It is unanimously agreed that no return to sport/activity on the day of concussive injury should occur.\
- Return to activity should be particularly cautious where children and adolescents are concerned.
Each individual international sports federation may have specific rules which must be considered (e.g. International Rugby Board rules for New Zealand Rugby).

The safety of the athlete is the priority and must NOT be compromised.

The decision regarding return to school/work and clearance to return to restricted activity should always be made by a medical doctor.

The decision regarding the timing of return to sport/activity should always be made by a medical doctor.

In some cases, symptoms may be prolonged or graded activity may not be tolerated. If recovery is prolonged, evaluation by a concussion specialist or clinic may be warranted to determine if there are other aspects of the concussion that could respond to rehabilitation.

In summary, the figure shows the roles and responsibilities for concussion management (i.e. stages of identification, assessment and diagnosis, rehabilitation and return to sport).
7. Develop a policy and implementation plan

It is suggested that National Sport Organizations (NSOs) and other relevant organisations develop a concussion policy and educate their members/community in how to implement the guidelines specific to their sport.

ACC has an ‘expert panel’ available that can be consulted to review organisations’ concussion policies, implementation plans and education material with the goal of ensuring a consistently high standard of care across New Zealand.


It is intended to formally review this document prior to February 2017.