

Module E: Manage Symptoms

This module presents information on:

- managing concussion symptoms, and
- persistent symptoms, also known as post-concussion syndrome.
- this module also addresses workplace accommodations to support return to work

It is important for workplace supervisors and coworkers to understand common concussion symptoms in order to create a supportive return to work environment. Supportive work environments are associated with early and sustained return to work, as well as improved morale and productivity.

Concussion symptoms can be managed using various strategies and techniques. Do not change, stop or reduce any medication without discussing it with a doctor. Strategies and techniques to minimize triggers for symptoms should be used in the short term only. If used on an extended basis, strategies can slow recovery. All strategies should be reviewed with a doctor or licensed medical professional.

Headache is the most common concussion symptom. Manage headaches by:

- Identifying and minimizing triggers. For example, if bothered by bright lights, try short-term use of sunglasses or a baseball cap, or if bothered by noise, try using earplugs;
 - Maintaining a healthy lifestyle, including proper nutrition, hydration, and sleep; and
 - Using medication, if appropriate, as directed by a licensed medical professional.
- Note: Medication may not be effective in relieving concussion headaches.

Nausea, dizziness and balance problems are common concussion symptoms that typically resolve quickly, with rest. Manage these symptoms by:

- Identifying and minimizing triggers. Triggers can include: motion, such as riding in an elevator or vehicle, busy patterns on carpets or wallpaper, fluorescent lights, and staring at a computer or television screen. Taking breaks in a calm environment may reduce symptoms.
- Identifying whether visual issues need to be addressed. Certain types of glasses, such as bifocal and varifocal lenses, may cause disorientation and can aggravate dizziness and balance problems. Special glasses, such as ones with prism lenses, can correct visual disorders that cause dizziness and imbalance following a concussion. For more information, consult a doctor or optometrist.
- Adjusting nighttime lighting by using nightlights, or carrying a small pocket flashlight; and using visual cues such as glow-in-the-dark stickers on light switches and door handles.

The workplace can help manage concussion symptoms by:

- Supporting use of personal accommodations;
- Facilitating access to environmental accommodations, such as a quiet room for breaks or providing lamps instead of overhead fluorescent lighting;
- Considering the use of technological accommodations, such as filters for computer monitors, applications which adjust monitor colours, or noise cancelling headphones; and,
- Providing print materials to reduce computer use.

Getting enough quality sleep is important for brain healing. Support good sleep by:

- Going to bed and waking up at the same time every day;
- Creating a regular bedtime routine;
- Sleeping in a quiet, dark, cool room;
- Maintaining a calm and relaxing sleep environment;
- Using medication, if appropriate, only as directed by a licensed medical professional; and
- Limiting naps to a maximum of 45 minutes per day.

The workplace can help ensure workers recovering from concussion get enough good quality sleep by switching the schedule to day shifts, if applicable.

Saving mental and physical energy can minimize symptoms and encourage brain healing.

Consider ways to conserve daily energy by:

- Prioritizing activities by determining what is most important and what must be done today;
- Planning activities by scheduling tasks. A schedule or daily log is helpful to track daily activities.
- Managing expectations of friends and family members. Returning to work may take a toll on mental and physical energy, with time outside of work required for rest and recovery. If friends or family are not able to help with household tasks, meal or grocery delivery services may provide assistance;
- Recognizing that yesterday's activities can affect energy levels today;
- Adjusting the pace, realizing that tasks might take longer than usual to complete, and may need to be broken up into smaller steps with breaks in between; and, if possible,
- Maintaining or seeking a calm environment. Noisy, busy, and distracting environments make it difficult to concentrate and will deplete energy levels.

Concussions can affect the sense of smell and taste, typically resolving in several weeks to six months. Manage these changes by:

- Ruling out damage to the nose, nasal passages, sinuses, or the olfactory nerve. The olfactory nerve carries the sense of smell and affects the sense of taste. Examination by a licensed medical professional is painless and non-invasive.
- Ruling out medication side effects.
- Checking expiration dates of food. Food may taste 'off', even if it has not spoiled.
- Setting scheduled reminders to eat; loss of taste and smell can lead to a reduced appetite and a lack of interest in food; and
- Ensuring fire alarms are functioning properly in order to provide an alert in case of fire.

If the workplace setting includes a risk of exposure to toxic fumes or gases, extra support for the impaired worker should be provided to ensure safety.

Concussions can affect mental health, and also exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions. Mental health symptoms may include anxiety and depression, and emotional difficulties such as mood swings and irritability. Mental health problems tend to be associated with concentration, memory, and sleep difficulties.

The following can be helpful in managing mental health challenges during concussion recovery:

- Physical activity, as tolerated;
- Deep breathing exercises;
- Identifying and reducing sources of stress;
- Meditation;
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation; and,
- Using a recording device during meetings and phone calls, and writing reminders for tasks and appointments to help with memory loss.

When mental health symptoms get to the point of interfering with daily activities or relationships, appropriate care from a doctor or nurse practitioner can help. Additional support from a psychologist, psychiatrist or other mental health professional may be needed.

More information for managing mental health symptoms can be found in the CATT Concussion Information Package for Workers and Workplaces.

It can be challenging to support a worker returning to work following a concussion, as they may seem fine from the outside. The worker may be in a vulnerable state — frustrated by their symptoms and worried that they may worsen in the future. Workplaces can help manage stress by creating a supportive environment, expressing empathy and reassurance, instead of skepticism or blame.

Other things to consider during recovery from concussion are:

- Maintaining a balanced diet and staying hydrated;
- Avoiding alcohol or recreational drug use;
- Limiting screen time, especially if work activities rely heavily on computer use; and
- Limiting activities which aggravate symptoms, such as driving or grocery shopping.

Although most adults recover within 4 weeks after sustaining a concussion, 15 to 30 percent may experience prolonged, persistent symptoms. Recovery time may be affected by:

- Number and severity of concussion symptoms;
- Recent concussion;
- History of three or more concussions;
- History of headaches or migraines;
- History of sleep issues or changes in sleep patterns;
- History of mental health challenges, including depression or anxiety;
- Returning to normal activities too quickly; and
- Returning to high-risk physical activities too quickly.

For anyone experiencing prolonged, persistent symptoms, referral by a licensed medical professional to specialists in concussion care, and an individualized treatment plan may be beneficial.

This could be either:

- Referral to a doctor with clinical training and experience in concussion, such as a sports medicine physician, a neurologist, or a rehabilitation medicine physician; or
- Referral to a medically supervised multidisciplinary concussion clinic, with access to licensed medical professionals with specialized training in traumatic brain injury.

Multidisciplinary management of persistent symptoms may involve collaboration from various healthcare professionals, including physiotherapists, occupational therapists, psychologists or counsellors, neuropsychologists, and optometrists, among others.

Specialized concussion care within Canada is currently unregulated, with a wide range of providers with varying levels of training and experience offering services. The Canadian Concussion Collaborative has provided a guide to help identify a qualified concussion clinic. Find out if the care is delivered by licensed healthcare providers, and ask the following questions:

- Does the clinic have a licensed medical doctor?
- Does the clinic have a team of licensed healthcare professionals?
- Does the clinic follow the most up-to-date standards of care for managing a concussion?
- And what tools, tests, and recommendations is the clinic using?

Check out the 4 Characteristics of a Good Concussion Clinic to understand how to evaluate the answers to these questions. A good concussion clinic will welcome questions and be open to discussion.

Continue to the quiz to test your knowledge on managing concussion symptoms.