

# SAFE RETURN TO SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY



### WHEN CAN I RETURN TO SPORT?

After a mild head injury it is important that you return to sport gradually. This will protect the brain and allow it to heal, and reduces the risk of another head injury while your brain is still recovering and vulnerable. A second impact may cause further damage or increase previous symptoms.

In general, physical activity helps your recovery but doing too much too soon could slow it down. It is better to miss one or two games than the whole season. You should tell your coaches, PE teachers, and team mates about your injury and explain that you will need to return to sport gradually until you are better. Ask them to keep an eye on you and tell you if they think you're not quite right.

You should rest for the first 2-3 days after your injury then start to do some light activity. You can do this even if you have symptoms. It is recommended that you follow a 5 STEP graded return to physical activity. Each stage should last a MINIMUM of 3 days, and some stages (especially 3. Heavy Non-Contact Activity) may need to last more than a week as you return to doing more complex tasks. That's OK. Go at your own pace. If symptoms re-occur at any stage you'll need to return to the previous step and only progress once you are symptom free. You should only progress to the next stage if symptoms don't worsen, unless under the advice of a healthcare professional.



## **STAGE 1: LIGHT ACTIVITY**

Don't start this stage until you have started going back to school. Do activities that don't make you short of breath, such as;

- longer walks on flat ground
- light-intensity stationary bike
- gentle stretches

## **STAGE 2: MODERATE ACTIVITY**

- You can commence light jogging, walking up/down hills, straight-line running drills, moderate intensity stationary bike, and light weights. Resistance training/weight lifting should initially be less time and less weight than usual.
- Avoid any head impact actions, and limit activities that involve your head and neck moving in a lot of different directions.
- You should only feel slightly breathless while doing these activities, and recover quickly.

## **STAGE 3: HEAVY NON-CONTACT ACTIVITY**

This stage involves progression of;

- training drills and activities to involve more complex body and head movement and agility/change of direction tasks. eg. ball passing, tennis, dancing, cheerleading, trampolining on your own, non-contact martial arts
- fitness activities to include moderate jogging, short sprints/running, and high-intensity stationary bike
- progress from lifting light weights (as per Stage 2) and gradually build up to your usual weight lifting routine by the end of Stage 3.

## **STAGE 4: FULL CONTACT PRACTICE**

You can do your normal training activities with supervision from an adult, including practice matches. Maximum physical exertion is allowed. You should be back at school full-time by this stage.

## **STAGE 5: RETURN TO COMPETITION**

Normal game play! You should only do this once you don't have ANY symptoms (physical or cognitive) and have completely recovered. You will need medical clearance to return to contact sports.

You should only return to activities where falling is a risk (eg. horse-riding, bicycle, scooter, skateboard, gymnastics, cheerleading throws, surfing, motorbike) when you are completely symptom free. This should be a minimum of three weeks and you should have completed Stages 1-3. Do these activities in safer environments first (eg. flat ground) before returning to your usual level.

Everyone is different. When you can safely return to sport could be longer than these timelines and may depend on factors such as;

1. Your age and the level of competitiveness/intensity of the sport(s) you play
2. Any previous concussion injuries
3. Mood disorders such as depression and anxiety
4. Previous medical history (including things like headaches, ADHD, learning difficulties)

## **SIGNS THAT YOU HAVE GONE BACK TOO SOON**

- symptoms (eg. headache or dizziness) get more than 30% worse with exercise
- your symptoms return
- your judgement, thinking skills, and vision while playing sport aren't as good as usual
- you don't feel safe during risky activities (eg. tackling, heading ball, changing direction suddenly) and can't protect your body and brain as well as usual

**Your symptoms after a head injury are more likely to be less severe and not last as long if you follow the above recommendations. Note that the recommendations apply to people who have a normal recovery from a concussion injury. If you have not been able to return to your pre-injury level of sport and physical activity by four weeks, see your doctor.**