## Occupational Therapy Department

Coping with a

Concussion or

Head Injury

He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, He tangata, He tangata.

What is the most important thing in the world? It is people.

**Patient and Whānau Information**

INTRODUCTION

We’ve all heard the story of someone who gets concussed. They are knocked out playing football or rugby and wake up at the side of the field dazed and confused. They are taken to the emergency department of the local hospital and after four hours they are well enough to go home. They feel bad for 24 hours; go back to work a couple of days later and a month later have almost forgotten the whole incident.

Unfortunately, this isn’t the complete picture – many have unpleasant symptoms for several weeks after being concussed, and in some cases the problems may last much longer.

Often people are unaware that this can happen and they may become very concerned and anxious. They may be afraid that they will never get back to feeling normal. It can be hard to make big decisions and family and friends may not understand what is going on for them.

**The good news is that these unpleasant symptoms don’t last forever, and that if you manage them properly there should be no long-term ill effects.**

**We want to share with you and your whānau some information about concussion, brain injury and who to reach out to for support.**

SYMPTOMS- THE FIRST COUPLE OF WEEKS

It’s different for everyone. Below is a list of symptoms that people could experience. On the next few pages there is advice on how to deal with these symptoms in the fortnight following the concussion.

**Tiredness**

* After concussion, the brain seems to have less energy as it is getting better. Even after a little effort you are likely to feel worn out. It is important to rest for the first 48 hours then gradually build up to doing your usual activities
* You will want to nap, go to bed early and sleep longer. When you feel like this, don’t feel ashamed to rest or go to bed.

**Headaches**

* Headaches can be expected in the early stages because of bruising to the brain from the injury
* Later, headaches are often due to tiredness and stress, when you are asking your brain to do more than it is capable of doing. This sort of headache can be helped by resting, but it is best to prevent it by not pushing yourself too hard when you are tired.

**Poor concentration**

* Concentration depends on being alert, and this is difficult when you are tired. If you are tired and can’t concentrate, rest
* If there’s something you must get done, start it when you are fresh after a sleep, and stop as soon as your attention begins to fade. If you haven’t finished, have a rest and try again.

**Forgetting things**

* You may find that you forget where you put your glasses or what you went to the dairy for, but you can remember what happened a year ago. This is partly because you are concentrating poorly, but also because concussion can put your short term memory system out of order for a while
* You may find it helps to make notes of important things and ask for help from support people – this will not stop your memory recovering.

**Irritability**

* Often people who have been concussed find that they are easily annoyed by things that normally wouldn’t worry them. They may get angry for nothing, snap at the family or their work mates. This occurs because self-control, like concentrating and remembering needs the support of your brain and your brain is taking time to heal
* The first thing to do is to be on watch for it happening if you feel you are getting annoyed and could lose it, it’s important to take some time out.

**Noise intolerance**

* Putting up with noise needs energy, and people find it difficult after they have been concussed. Children playing, a loud radio or machinery at work may be unbearable
* The only way to fix this is to avoid the noise – ask the family to help you by turning down the volume, ask for help with childcare and avoid noisy areas.

**Dizziness**

* Concussion sometimes upsets the balance organs in the ears, and for a short while after the injury a sudden movement of the head can make you feel dizzy, so that the world seems to spin around you
* More often people feel like they are floating or things are a bit unreal, which they describe as dizziness. Both of these settle down in time.

**Clumsiness**

* When you are recovering from a concussion, you may find that you bump into people in the street or drop the dishes when you are drying them. Again, this is your brain reacting and working slower than usual
* Take it as a warning that you should take special care when there could be danger, like crossing the street, and you shouldn’t be driving your car if you are reacting slowly.

**Eye problems**

* After concussion people find that bright light worries them, and that it helps to wear sunglasses, even indoors
* Avoid a lot of screen time - reduce the amount of time you are using your cell phone or looking at a TV or computer
* Sight is sometimes a little blurred, either because the eyes are not focusing well, or because they are not lining up correctly. Again this is the result of the brain not working as well as usual. This almost always corrects itself, but get expert advice if it doesn’t get better.

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT YOUR RECOVERY AFTER A CONCUSSION OR BRAIN INJURY

**Set up a daily routine**

* Develop a routine around your daily tasks and activities (personal cares, light activities - both brain work and physical activities). Mix up activities that drain the brain with activities that help it recharge.

**Rest**

* Pace yourself and rest when you are tired, and avoid getting so tired that you experience more symptoms or they get worse.

**Increase gradually**

* As you get better, you should slowly step up the amount you do, each time making sure that you can cope before making a change.

**Getting people to understand**

* It’s important that others know what’s happening, that the symptoms are real, and directly due to the accident
* Share this booklet or other handouts with friends, whānau/family and colleagues to help them understand more about concussion and traumatic brain injury- symptoms and ways to support
* The team will be glad to talk to your family and ACC can support your employer about your job situation.

**Go back to work in easy stages**

* As it becomes possible to do more, you can think of starting work again
* It is important that the return to work is in easy stages, possibly starting with just half a day, perhaps three days a week, and then increasing the time at work slowly as tolerated. It may not be easy to arrange this with your employer, ACC or your health team may be able to help.

**SPECIAL PROBLEMS WITH A CONCUSSION/HEAD INJURY**

**School and university students**

* Those at secondary school and university depend on their ability to learn, and even a short period of incapacity at a critical time, such as a run-up to exams, can have a serious effect. Reach out to health professionals to support creating a routine around schoolwork and study.

**Older people**

* As people reach middle age, they are likely to be more affected by head injury. The symptoms they have are the same, but they often need more help and more time to get over them.

**People who work on their own**

* Homemakers and people with their own businesses can have special difficulty in managing their head injury symptoms
* Often, they feel that they can’t afford to stop working, and so they deny that they’re ill. Because they’re not coping, the problems mount up and they become more and more stressed until a crisis occurs. Friends and family can work with the person and health professionals to support them.

**Sports injuries – when to play again**

* Concussion is quite common in some sports, and there may be pressure to play down its effects. It is dangerous to life to risk a second concussion within a few weeks of the first one
* Some sports bodies, notably the Rugby Union, have strict rules about this and it is irresponsible not to follow them.

**Repeated head injury**

* Each head injury, even mild concussion, permanently reduces the capacity of the brain by a small amount. The reserve of brain power that we all have will conceal the loss after one or two injuries, but if there are more than this the loss will start to show, by slowing of thought, poor memory and change of character
* Those who have had more than one injury should think carefully before exposing themselves to repeated risks, such as those of rugby and boxing. A good rule is not to play again this season if you have two concussions, and to give up the sport if you have one more.

**WHAT TO REMEMBER AFTER HAVING A MILD HEAD INJURY**

* **Do not** drive your car or motorbike until you have made sure that your concentration is good and your reactions are quick enough
* **Do not** expect to deal with alcohol in the usual way until you have fully recovered. One small drink may leave you flat, can make your symptoms worse and slow down your recovery
* **Do not** expose yourself to the risk of another injury. Until you have recovered completely your reactions will be slow and you may be clumsy, just inviting a second accident
* **Do not** think that it’s giving in to have a rest when you are tired. It is important to rest when needed and slowly build up to doing activities
* **Do** start work again by easy stages.

**Tips for whānau, from whānau- ‘How to after brain injury’**

**(written by people who have experienced a brain injury and their support people)**

After a brain injury it is normal to experience a few or many of the above symptoms- feeling tired, confused, have headaches, be dizzy, irritable and/or emotional.

**Family/whānau and support people are an important part of getting better!**

You can help by-

* Going to appointments with the person - listening to what is being said, remembering what to do next and sharing with health professionals symptoms or experiences the person may have forgotten while in the appointment
* Be there for them, you don’t have to be a medical expert. Simple things like making sure they are eating, drinking and resting. Following up with appointments. Lots of rest is recommended in the first couple of days, then gradual return to usual activities
* Remind them to take it slow and be patient with themselves, even down the track. ‘Remember to breathe and take things slowly’

* A concussion or brain injury can change people’s mood and how they act. Also, there ability to concentrate, remember things and their awareness of symptoms
* Be kind to yourself as a support person, it is normal to find it hard seeing changes in the person you love and care for
* As a support person, make sure you are looking after yourself so you can look after them. Have ‘me time’ and allow yourself to feel your feelings (GP’s, counsellors and support groups can help with this).

**GETTING THE HELP YOU NEED**

* In hospital, there are doctors, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, social workers, takawaenga and other health professionals who can review and provide advice and support to you around your injury
* When you are discharged from hospital, you will likely be referred to the ACC Concussion Service who will provide follow-up support around your concussion/traumatic brain injury for you and your whānau/support person. You should expect to receive a phone call from a community provider within a week of discharging from hospital. If you don’t hear from someone, please contact ACC (0800 101 996) with your ACC number to ask or follow-up with your GP
* Some people may also receive support through an ACC Training for Independence programme, particularly if you have been in hospital or an inpatient facility for a longer period after your injury.

**AGENCIES THAT CAN HELP**

**ACC**

* ACC is there to help. You should make a claim as soon as possible after the accident
* The hospital staff will have an ACC45 ‘Claim for Cover’ form and will show you how to fill this in, make sure that your ACC45 claim form has been sent to ACC by the hospital or GP
* If the doctor advises you not to return to work, ask for an ACC18 Medical Certificate to send to ACC stating how long you need to be off work
* ACC will help ensure that you receive the right treatment, compensation and rehabilitation. You may be entitled to several different types of assistance from ACC including health and in home support
* ACC Helpline telephone number is: 0800 101 996

**The Brain Injury Association of New Zealand**

The Brain Injury Association of NZ is an advocacy organisation. It provides people with a brain injury and their families, with information, education and support through Family Liaison Officers at branches throughout New Zealand.

For further information:

Tel: (09) 459 5013

Email: [northland@brain-injury.org.nz](mailto:northland@brain-injury.org.nz)

Website: [www.brain-injury-nz.org](http://www.brain-injury-nz.org)

**OTHER TELEPHONE NUMBERS THAT MAY BE OF ASSISTANCE**

**Concussion Service**

A referral to the concussion service will likely be completed when you discharge from hospital.

**ACC Whangarei Branch**

Tel: (09) 437 9500

**ACC Contact Centre**

Tel: 0800 101 996

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**CONTACT**

If you have any further questions once you have been discharged from hospital, ask your family GP.

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