

Emergency Department Online

ADULT HEAD INJURY

You've been seen by a doctor or nurse and assessed as fit to go home following a head injury. Most people with minor head injuries recover fully within a few days, but some may experience symptoms that need monitoring. This leaflet explains what to expect, how to care for yourself, and when to seek help.

Common symptoms after a minor head injury

These symptoms are usually mild and go away on their own. Most symptoms resolve after a few days, but they may persist for up to two weeks.

- Mild headache
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Feeling sick (without vomiting)
- Tiredness or difficulty sleeping
- Irritability or feeling more emotional
- Poor concentration or short-term memory issues
- Sensitivity to noise or light

These symptoms are normal after a head injury and should gradually improve. If they get worse, or don't start to improve after two weeks, please seek medical advice.

When to seek medical attention

If you experience any of the following symptoms, you should return to your nearest Emergency Department.

- Severe or worsening headache that doesn't go away (a mild headache is common and can be treated with simple painkillers such as paracetamol)

- Unusual drowsiness or difficulty waking up
- Vomiting
- Confusion, disorientation, or unusual behaviour
- Slurred speech or trouble understanding others
- Seizures (fits)
- Loss of consciousness
- Loss of balance, difficulty walking
- Weakness or numbness in your arms or legs
- Clear fluid or blood from your ears or nose
- New hearing loss
- Blurred/double vision
- Neck stiffness

These could be signs of a more serious injury, even if you felt well initially. For the first 24 hours after a head injury, it is important that you stay with a responsible adult who has read the advice in this leaflet.

How to support your recovery

To give your brain time to heal you should:

- Rest (both mentally and physically) for at least the first 24–48 hours
- Take simple over-the-counter painkillers such as paracetamol if needed
- Avoid alcohol and sedatives for at least 48 hours
- Avoid using screens (TV, phone, gaming, or reading) for 24–48 hours
- Gradually return to normal daily activities as you feel better

When can I drive or go back to work?

- **Driving:** Avoid driving for at least 24–48 hours. You must feel fully alert and symptom-free before driving again.
- **Work/Study:** Return when symptoms like headache, dizziness or fatigue have resolved. Start with half days if needed. It is unusual to need more than a day or two off work after a minor head injury.
- **Screens:** Avoid prolonged screen time until symptoms settle.

When can I return to sports or physical activity?

Follow the principle of the four Rs: recognise, remove, rest and return.

- Recognise symptoms of a concussion such as headaches, poor concentration, dizziness, “not feeling right”
- Remove yourself from intense physical activity while you recover
- Rest completely, both physically and mentally, for the first 24 hours
- Return gradually to sport after a minimum of 14 days and once completely symptom-free. Use a Graduated Return To Play (GRTP) plan, available from your sport’s governing body.

If you are taking blood thinners (e.g., warfarin, apixaban, rivaroxaban, edoxaban and dabigatran)

- You may be at higher risk of bleeding even with a mild head injury. You should seek medical attention if you suffer a head injury whilst taking a blood thinner.
- Follow the advice given by your doctor about continuing or pausing your medication.
- Monitor symptoms carefully and seek medical attention if you feel worse.

Summary

Most people recover fully from minor head injuries. Rest, monitor your symptoms, and seek help if you feel worse. Take your time returning to normal life, your brain needs time to heal, even if you “look fine” on the outside.