

Concussions and Sleep: What You Need to Know



Concussions are common—as many as 3.8 million occur in the U.S. each year, according to the [Brain Injury Research Institute](#)—and they’re well known for causing headaches, memory loss and confusion. But a concussion can also mess with sleep for months following an injury.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control](#), a concussion happens when the brain shifts quickly inside your skull. That movement damages brain cells and causes chemical changes that can lead to cognitive problems. After a concussion, doctors often recommend laying low for a while—taking a hiatus from work or school and limiting TV, texting and other activities that could strain the brain.

Most people who follow those instructions will feel better within 10 days, says Dr. Barry D. Jordan, director of

neurorehabilitation at Burke Rehabilitation Hospital and chief medical officer of the New York State Athletic Commission. “Ninety percent of concussions are better in a month,” says Jordan.

Although rest is crucial to the recovery process, having a concussion can impact your sleep patterns. According to the experts at the [Marshfield Clinic](#), fatigue is common after a concussion, so some people might want to snooze a lot or have trouble waking up. Others may find that their sleep-related symptoms evolve over time.

“Right after a concussion, some people might be a little lethargic and slow, even if they didn’t lose consciousness,” says Jordan. “That same day, you might sleep more than usual, but later on you could have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep through the night.”

The problem, says Jordan, is that a concussion can throw your internal body clock out of whack, so your brain may have trouble figuring out when you’re supposed to wake up or get sleepy. Even if you are able to doze off at the right time, you may toss and turn or wake up in the morning still feeling fatigued.

For most people, it’s an issue of just a week or maybe a month, but another unlucky 10 percent don’t heal so quickly.

“If someone is slow to recover, people say it’s ‘post-concussion syndrome,’” says Jordan, who notes that the term doesn’t have a strict definition and is somewhat controversial. The [Mayo Clinic](#) says that post-concussion syndrome—which may include headaches, dizziness and sleep disturbances—can last anywhere from seven days to over a year.

A recent study from the journal [Neurology](#) supports the notion that the damage can be long-lasting. Researchers found that many patients with traumatic brain injuries, including concussions, still have sleep trouble a year and a half after their injury.

Post-concussion sleep problems are a bit of a catch-22, says Jordan: “When you have a brain injury, you need to rest to heal and recover, and not getting good sleep may slow down your recovery.”

Reclaim your rest

If you’ve had a concussion and are having trouble sleeping or staying asleep, you may be tempted to ask your doctor for a prescription sleep aid. Don’t do it, says Jordan. Many sleep aids can worsen concussion-related cognitive problems, like memory loss and confusion, he says. Instead, talk to your doctor about melatonin, a hormone available over the counter. Your body is supposed to naturally produce this hormone as it gets darker outside; it helps you feel sleepy.

Good sleep hygiene is also key for getting your circadian rhythms back on track. Sleep only at night, in a dark, quiet room, avoid alcohol and caffeine within several hours of bedtime, and leave plenty of time to relax and unwind before bed.

For concussion patients who still have trouble dozing off and don't wake up refreshed, it might be time to see a specialist for more help.