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Concussion Thoughts

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Concussions are treated on an individual basis. Everybody is different and every concussion can be different. It really boils down to symptoms. When one has a concussion he/she can have one symptom or he/she can have over twenty symptoms. Concussions that resolve quickly are usually managed by one health care provider. However, some concussions are more complex, resolving over a prolonged period of time. These complex concussions are usually treated in a team approach, utilizing multiple physicians and therapists.

We are learning more about concussions every day. I have been treating sports-related concussions since 2002. The following information is my thoughts on concussion. These thoughts are based on current concussion research and my clinical experience.

Rest

The initial treatment of concussion is rest. Patients need both physical rest from exercise activity (Sports, working out) and mental rest from intellectual activity (academics, puzzles, video games). The brain needs rest to recover from injury. However, too much rest can become a bad thing. Studies are now showing that too much inactivity can prolong concussion recovery. You will find that many healthcare providers are unaware of this information and will tell concussion patients to rest until symptoms completely resolve. My recommendation: 2-3 days after the initial injury, even if you are still having symptoms from your concussion, start doing some easy type of activity. Get out of the house, go for a walk, breathe some fresh air, do some simple school assignments. I do NOT mean go back to sports competition or write a term paper. What I mean is start doing some simple activities for short periods of time. If you can tolerate the activity, slightly increase the intensity or duration of that activity the next time you do it. If you have a hard time with it, back off. Listen to your body. Stay hydrated, have a breakfast with protein in it, and have small snacks throughout the day.

Symptoms

As stated above, there is a wide variety of symptoms involved with concussion. Concussions are managed by the dominant symptoms that a patient is experiencing. Because there are so many symptoms when it comes to concussion, one needs to understand that there may be some overlap with other medical problems that can often blur the lines. In other words, not all concussion symptoms are from a concussion.

Stress

The athlete (especially the STUDENT-athlete) is often stressed when he/she gets a concussion. The athlete is stressed about the injury, stressed about not playing, and stressed about all the missed school-work. The activity that allows the athlete to burn off the stress is now taken away from him/her. (Maybe why too much rest is a bad thing) Effects of stress can be headache, fatigue, irritability, anxiety, difficulty sleeping and concentrating. Guess what? Those effects are concussion symptoms! Again, not all concussion symptoms are from a concussion.

Long term problems

Concussion has been a hot topic in sports medicine and the media lately. This is obviously due to the problems that some retired NFL football players are having. These retired players have CTE, chronic traumatic encephalopathy. Patients with CTE can experience depression, forgetfulness, personality changes and coordination problems. We are still learning about CTE. However, one thing that studies are showing is that it is not necessarily from concussions. It is thought that CTE is caused by all the head blows that an athlete has received over his/her entire career, concussive and sub-concussive blows combined. Let's face it, a NFL football player has had thousands of hits to his head, from Pop-Warner football, through high school, college and pros. Thousands more than a high school soccer player.

Conclusion

Don't get me wrong, I am not trying to minimize concussions. I think we manage concussions significantly better than we did a couple of years ago. What I am trying to say is that most patients will recover from their concussion quickly and with no long term problems. When it comes to the middle-school or high school athlete, they should fully recover with-in a couple of days or weeks. If they do not, it is far more likely that their "concussion symptoms" can be better explained by another condition. (Migraines, stress, psycho-social issues)