

5

General Recommendations Regarding Management of Prolonged Symptoms

What can I do to manage prolonged symptoms?

Talk to your primary healthcare provider if you have prolonged symptoms after a concussion/mTBI. You will need to have a physical exam as well as an exertion test to find out how different levels of physical activity affect your symptoms. Symptoms of concussion/mTBI are sometimes linked to other conditions, such as depression, anxiety, irritability, headache, poor concentration, sleep problems, dizziness, and fatigue.

For this reason, when deciding on the best way to manage your prolonged symptoms, your primary care provider should consider many factors, including any emotional distress, fatigue, or pain you may be feeling. The aim of treatment is to improve your ability to function in your daily life. Depending on the symptoms you are having, you may need to see your primary healthcare provider every few weeks to see if your symptoms are improving, persisting, or getting worse.

Having the support of your family and friends during this time will be important as you adjust to life after your injury. You may want to consider having a friend or family member with you at your appointments to help you communicate with your healthcare provider, and to remember their instructions.

Do I need to see a concussion/mTBI specialist?

There are many healthcare providers that could play an important role in managing prolonged symptoms. After a few weeks if your symptoms are not improving, your primary healthcare provider will refer you to other healthcare providers as needed. Your healthcare providers will treat your symptoms in a coordinated way, working together to help manage your symptoms.

Referral to other providers will depend on your injury, symptoms, previous medical conditions, and the results of your medical exam and tests. Referrals may include:

- Mental health specialists for symptoms related to depression and anxiety
- Rehabilitation providers for symptoms related to physical or cognitive difficulties. These include an occupational therapist, physiotherapist, speech language pathologist, chiropractor, or psychologist to name a few
- In some cases, it may be necessary for you to go to a clinic that specializes in concussion/mTBI



- Assessment to find out if you need accommodations when you return to work, school, family, and day-to-day activities

When can I return to daily activities?

It is recommended to add regular, mild exercise as you return to your usual activities and life roles. It is important to add these activities gradually over time, so they do not bring on new symptoms or make your symptoms worse. Everyone has an individual threshold for when the onset of symptoms may begin. The goal is to gradually increase your activity tolerance without increasing your symptoms or crossing symptom threshold.

You need to find the right level of activity where your symptoms are either eliminated or manageable. As your symptoms are better controlled, you can gradually increase your activity level. For optimal recovery, you should aim to remain below your significant symptom threshold. Doing nothing at all will not promote recovery, but doing too much each day may cause prolonged symptoms. See Parkwood pacing graph resource on page 3 of this document for more information regarding symptom threshold and pacing.

What strategies can I use to monitor symptoms and progress?

Planning and pacing your activities is important. There are many strategies that could help monitor, manage, and track your symptoms and progress:

- Start with shorter bouts of structured exercise/activity, with rest in between
- Switch between different types of activities. For example, switching from reading to walking
- Plan and schedule your days in advance, where you can schedule activities and rest breaks throughout a number of days instead of trying to push through
- An agenda will assist with remembering appointments, tasks, and commitments
- Tracking your activities will help determine relationships with activities and symptom onset, or patterns of setback
- Using a timer will help set time restrictions for activities, so you can stop a task soon after symptom onset. Keeping track of this allows you to monitor your response to activity and teach you how to pace



The Key Guideline Recommendations for Healthcare Providers

The following key guideline recommendations for healthcare providers have been included here so you can see what the guideline recommends healthcare providers do in assessing and treating patients after concussion/mTBI.

5.2	Prolonged symptoms after concussion/mTBI should lead primary care providers to consider that many factors may contribute to the persistence of post-concussive symptoms. All relevant factors (medical, cognitive, psychological and psychosocial) should be examined with regards to how they contribute to the patient's symptom presentation and considered in the management strategies.
5.3	Persons with concussion/mTBI and identified factors typically associated with prolonged symptoms should be considered for early referral to an interdisciplinary treatment clinic including a physician with expertise in concussion/mTBI where available or interdisciplinary formal network of providers capable of managing post-concussive symptoms because these factors have been associated with poorer outcomes.

Additional resources

Patient Care Pathway

<http://concussionsontario.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/ONF-PatientPathway-Tearaway-WEB-1.pdf>

Parkwood Pacing Graphs

<https://braininjuryguidelines.org/concussion/fileadmin/media/appendices/appendix-2-2.pdf>

Appointment tracker

<https://braininjuryguidelines.org/concussion/fileadmin/media/appointment-tracker.pdf>



Cautionary Note to Users

The content of the *Guideline for Concussion/mTBI & Prolonged Symptoms, 3rd Edition: for Adults over 18 years*, is based on the status of scientific knowledge available at the time of their finalization (2017) as well as on the consensus of the experts who participated in the guideline development.

This guideline has been created to provide recommendations and help with management of concussion/mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI). It is only for management for adults over 18 years of age. This guideline is not intended for use by people who have sustained or are suspected of having sustained a concussion/mTBI for any self-diagnosis or treatment.

The guideline can be used by patients when speaking with healthcare providers about their care. It covers getting a diagnosis, managing symptoms in the early phase (acute) and management in the longer recovery phase (prolonged symptoms). Patients may wish to bring their healthcare and other providers' attention to this guideline. It is based on up-to-date, quality research evidence, the expertise of providers and the input of patients.

