

Concussion in Older Adults

Diagnosing Concussion in Older Adults (over age 65)

Concussion can be caused by either a direct hit or force to the head, face, neck or other part of the body that makes the brain move inside the skull. The brain can become injured if this happens. Some examples of what can cause a concussion include a fall, a motor vehicle accident, assault, or other impacts to the head, neck, or body.

Concussion is diagnosed in the same way for everyone. However, older people (over the age of 65) may be more likely to have a concussion from any of these types of injuries.

An older person should always be assessed for concussion if they have had such injuries. An older person who suddenly shows more confusion or other cognitive issues may also be assessed for concussion.

If you think you or someone you know might have a concussion, it is important to have a full and proper assessment and get a diagnosis as soon as possible.

Special Considerations

If an older person (older than age 65) goes to the Emergency Department and a concussion is suspected, a CT scan will be ordered to rule out a more serious injury.

Older people are also more likely to be on a type of medication called anti-coagulants. Anti-coagulants are medications that stop blood from clotting too easily. People on anticoagulants will also get a CT scan if a concussion is suspected.

Older people respond to the same types of treatments as younger people do for all concussion symptoms.

Patient tips

Below are some tips from our patients for what they found helpful when they were first diagnosed with concussion.

Bring a support person

Bringing a support person like a family member or close friend with you to your medical appointments is a helpful way to make sure you talk about all your symptoms and understand any instructions you are given. After a concussion, it can be hard to remember large amounts of new information, and a support person can help you do this.

Keep a symptom journal

It is a good idea to keep track of your symptoms in a journal or log for future medical appointments. This way you can make sure you are not forgetting anything when you speak with your healthcare provider.



Following diagnosis

Once a concussion has been diagnosed, your healthcare provider should give you and your support person written and verbal information/advice about concussion management and what to do to get better. This information should cover:



Usual symptoms to expect and information about recovery.



Lifestyle advice to help your recovery



Signs of worsening or new symptoms (see below) that would mean you need to follow-up with a healthcare provider right away.

Signs of worsening or new symptoms:

- Headache that gets worse and does not go away
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Loss of consciousness
- Extreme fatigue or not able to wake up
- Weakness or numbness
- Balance problems
- Slurred speech
- Unusual behaviour, agitation, or confusion

Note that older people are more likely to already have other health conditions that can overlap with concussion symptoms or they may be on medications that can make symptoms worse. Follow up with a healthcare provider is important so that they can check that concussion symptoms are improving as expected.

About recovery

Each patient and their concussion are unique and should be on a case-by-case basis.

An older patient who has several health conditions before injury may need to be referred to a specialist or specialty clinic to properly manage their health issues and the concussion symptoms.

Most people, of all ages, recover from a concussion within a few weeks after a brief period of relative rest (24-48 hours following the injury and a gradual return to activities. Some patients (approximately 15-20%) will experience prolonged symptoms lasting beyond one month.

Being of older age is a risk factor for having prolonged symptoms.

Additional Resources

Below is a list of resources you may find helpful to learn more about concussion diagnosis, as well as tools that may help you with your recovery process.

Concussion Information for Patients and Families (booklet)

https://concussionsontario.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/Concussion-Booklet%20CLEAN_May-2024.pdf

Concussion (video)

<https://www.cedars-sinai.org/health-library/video-library/video-detail/c/concussion.html>

Preventing falls (website)

<https://www.ottawahospital.on.ca/en/healthy-tomorrows/preventing-falls-evidence-based-tips-for-seniors-and-older-adults/>

For more information about managing prolonged symptoms following a concussion, refer to our other patient guideline sections.