

# 12

# Return-to-Activity: School Considerations

Gradual return to your activities and participation is important for your recovery, starting with a few days to weeks after your injury. Activity is more likely to speed up your recovery than delay it. However, it is important to remember your threshold and be aware of your symptoms. The physical, mental, and emotional difficulties after a concussion/mTBI can make it difficult for you to do regular activities.

During your recovery period, and especially in the first 7 to 10 days, avoid any activity that might put you at risk of having another concussion/mTBI. If you feel the onset of any existing or new symptoms, remember to take frequent breaks and keep the activity load light.

## **What should I consider about returning to school?**

Most people can return to work or school within 1 to 2 weeks after the injury. When planning your return to regular activities you need to consider both cognitive and physical activity because both have potential to make your concussion/mTBI symptoms worse.

In the early days after your injury, try to avoid activities that can have a high cognitive load. These are activities that require a lot of attention, concentration, and problem solving. For example:

- Reading or doing tasks that need you to focus or problem-solve
- Using a computer or cell phone, watching TV, or playing video games,
- Being in a demanding social situation; such as with too many people, too much noise, or too many things happening at once

It will be helpful for you or your family members to keep track of your tolerance level for both cognitive and physical activity. If any activity causes the onset of new or existing symptoms, reduce your effort for a short while. Take frequent breaks and gradually resume the activity for a shorter period of time.

You may need to do an exertion test (such as a graded treadmill exercise test) to identify the level of effort that causes your symptoms to return. This is what is known as “your threshold”, and the results of this test will be useful when planning your return-to-activity plan.



## How can I manage my symptoms at school?

Returning to some activity as soon as possible after concussion/mTBI will improve your health and well-being. The support of your family, friends, and healthcare providers are important to your recovery.

It is important that you, a family member, or a support person contact your school's student services office as soon as possible after your injury to make sure you'll have as much support as possible. Other people who may be involved in developing your management plan include your school's accommodations services, academic support staff, your course instructors and your team healthcare provider or coach if you play sports.

## What symptoms might I experience after a concussion/mTBI?

Symptoms can impact your ability to manage school responsibilities. Mental effort or cognitive exertion can make symptoms worse and affect how quickly you recover from your injury. You may experience the following symptoms:

- **Physical:** Such as sensitivity to light (photophobia) and sound (sonophobia), or balance and physical fatigue.
- **Cognitive:** Affecting your ability to focus, understand, remember information, prioritize, multi-task, organize, plan, and manage your time. The cognitive demands associated with post-secondary studies include listening to lectures, note-taking, giving presentations, doing homework and assignments, taking exams and participating in clubs or committees.
- **Mood-related:** affecting your ability to be in large groups or busy places, dealing with stress, and managing your feelings.

Having a primary healthcare provider with experience in concussion/mTBI rehabilitation will be useful to guide you and your instructors through the recovery process. It is also important that you update your primary healthcare providers, teachers, and school's services office about your progress, challenges, and changes in symptoms.



## How do I gradually return to post-secondary education?

Time	Limited or no symptoms	Frequent or several symptoms
1 to 2 days after the injury	<p>You can go to school but monitor your symptoms.</p> <p>Do not take any tests or exams. If you must write a test or exam, you will need accommodations and someone to monitor your symptoms.</p> <p>Accommodations could be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separate quiet space</li> <li>• Taking frequent breaks</li> <li>• Dimmed lights</li> <li>• Additional time</li> </ul>	<p>Do not go to school or participate in any academic and sport activities, including apprenticeship, practicum, and shop related activities.</p> <p>Your primary healthcare provider or other healthcare providers can help you identify modified study tasks that you can do at home.</p> <p>Make sure you can participate in school and life activities without making your symptoms worse, before you participate in sports or other activities.</p>
1 to 2 weeks after the injury	<p>Continue with school and keep using any accommodations you may have.</p> <p>Continue monitoring any symptoms you may have.</p>	<p>If you are still having difficulty functioning, you will need more time away from your academic activities.</p> <p>Your primary healthcare provider should update your school's student services or accessibility services about your status.</p>
More than 2 weeks after the injury	<p>You can go back to your academic activities very gradually, as long as you can tolerate any symptoms you may have.</p> <p>Accessibility services should be notified so that instructors can help you monitor progress.</p>	<p>If you are still having difficulties, you may need to see someone who specializes in concussion/mTBI.</p> <p>Review all the accommodations you may need with your primary healthcare provider, such as cognitive demands of your classes or taking a temporary break from school.</p>



## Key Guideline Recommendations

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

12.1	Immediately following any concussion/mTBI, patients should be provided with recommendations to avoid activities that would increase their risk for sustaining another concussion during the recovery period, particularly in the first 7-10 days.
12.2	Patients with concussion/mTBI should be encouraged to gradually resume normal activity (activities of daily living, work, physical, school, duty leisure) based upon their tolerance as long as the activity is not at specific risk for concussion. Patients should be pre-emptively cautioned that transient symptom exacerbation with increased activity are common. If symptoms increase in severity, then a monitored slower progressive return to normal activity as tolerated should be continues
12.4	<p>Within 24-48 hours post-injury:</p> <p>If asymptomatic: The student can attend schools tolerated but should not undergo evaluations (tests/exams) or should not undergo evaluations (tests/exams) or should write with accommodations (such as separate space, paced breaks, rooms where lights can be altered, additional time) and should be monitored for potential symptoms.</p> <p>If symptomatic: The student should refrain from attending school and from participating in all academic and sports activities, including apprenticeship, practicum, and shop related activities, in order to decrease the risk for symptom exacerbation. In addition, the student should be offered psychoeducation and modified at-home study tasks as tolerated. Students should be able to tolerate school and life responsibilities prior to participating in sport or activities that put them at risk.</p> <p>After 24-48 hours post injury:</p> <p>If asymptomatic: the student may return to academic/program related activities as tolerated as long as they remain asymptomatic.</p> <p>If symptomatic: the student should refrain from attending academic and/or program related activities for one full week and up to two full weeks if symptoms</p>



remain functionally debilitating.

- Connect with academic accessibility/disability services to request accommodations and receive additional support
- Be monitored for the emergence of potential symptoms and be provided with support and education.
- The healthcare professional (with permission) should ensure that accessibility/disability services are notified that a concussion/mTBI has occurred and that the student will require time off and may require accommodations and support for reintegration.
- Reintegration should occur progressively and specific accommodations should match the student's residual symptoms.

1-2 weeks post-injury:

If symptoms are still functionally debilitating at 1 week post-injury the student should refrain from attending academic and/or program-related activities. The healthcare professional should again notify accessibility/disability services that the student is still symptomatic and accommodations and support for reintegration will be required.

After 2 weeks post-injury:

The student should start attending school (non-physical activities) very gradually as tolerated and with accommodations, even if he/she is still experiencing symptoms. A healthcare professional with experience in concussion/mTBI rehabilitation should provide guidance to the student and educators. Accessibility/disability services should be notified again so teachers/professors can subsequently monitor progress with the student and adjust the return-to-school plan, as necessary.

## Additional Resources

Concussion/mTBI intake package for student services/special needs department  
<https://braininjuryguidelines.org/concussion/fileadmin/media/appendices/appendix-12-2.pdf>

Acute Concussion Evaluation (ACE) Care Plan – School Version  
<https://braininjuryguidelines.org/concussion/fileadmin/media/appendices/appendix-12-6.pdf>



## Return-to-School Considerations

<https://braininjuryguidelines.org/concussion/fileadmin/media/algorithms/algorithm-12-2.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.

