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Head Injuries

Overview

Are head injuries serious?

They can be. Bleeding, tearing of tissues and brain swelling can occur when the brain moves inside the skull at the time of an impact. But most people recover from head injuries and have no lasting effects.

Types of head injuries

- A concussion is a jarring injury to the brain. A person who has a concussion usually, but not always, passes out for a short while. The person may feel dazed and may lose vision or balance for a while after the injury.
- A brain contusion is a bruise of the brain. This means there is some bleeding in the brain, causing swelling.
- A skull fracture is when the skull cracks. Sometimes the edges of broken skull bones cut into the brain and cause bleeding or other injury.
- A hematoma is bleeding in the brain that collects and clots, forming a bump. A hematoma may not be apparent for a day or even as long as several weeks. So it's important to tell your doctor if someone with a head injury feels or acts oddly. Watch out for headaches, listlessness, balance problems or throwing up.

Symptoms

What happens after a head injury?

It's normal to have a headache and nausea, and feel dizzy right after a head injury. Other symptoms include ringing in the ears, neck pain, and feeling anxious, upset, irritable, depressed or tired.

The person who has had a head injury may also have problems concentrating, remembering things, putting thoughts together or doing more than one thing at a time.

These symptoms usually go away in a few weeks, but may go on for more than a year if the injury was severe.

Get help if you notice the following symptoms:

- Any symptom that is getting worse, such as headaches, nausea or sleepiness
- Nausea that doesn't go away
- Changes in behavior, such as irritability or confusion
- Dilated pupils (pupils that are bigger than normal) or pupils of different sizes

- Trouble walking or speaking
- Drainage of bloody or clear fluids from ears or nose
- Vomiting
- Seizures
- Weakness or numbness in the arms or legs

Causes & Risk Factors

What are the main causes of head injuries?

A serious head injury is most likely to happen to someone who is in a car wreck and isn't wearing a seat belt. Other major causes of head injuries include bicycle or motorcycle wrecks, falls from windows (especially among children who live in the city) and falls around the house (especially among toddlers and the elderly).

Diagnosis & Tests

How can the doctor tell how bad the damage is?

The doctor will ask about how the injury occurred, about past medical problems, and about vomiting, seizures (fits) or problems breathing after an injury.

The injured person may need to stay in the hospital to be watched. Sometimes, tests that take pictures of the brain, such as a computerized tomography (CT) or a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan, are needed to find out more about possible damage.

Is it true that the person must be kept awake after the injury?

No. If the doctor thinks the person needs to be watched this closely, he or she will probably put the person in the hospital.

Sometimes, doctors will send someone who has had a head injury home if the person with them is reliable enough to watch the injured person closely. In this case, the doctor may ask that the person be awakened frequently and asked questions such as "What's your name?" and "Where are you?" to make sure everything is okay.

Complications

Will the head injury cause permanent brain damage?

This depends on how bad the injury was and how much damage it did. Most head injuries don't cause permanent damage.

What about memory loss?

It's common for someone who's had a head injury to forget the events right before, during and right after the accident. Memory of these events may never come back. Following recovery, the ability to learn and remember new things almost always returns.

Other Organizations

- Brain Injury Association of America

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- How can I tell if a head injury is serious?
- I feel fine after hitting my head. Is there anything to watch for?
- When can I start playing sports again after a head injury?
- How can brain damage from a head injury be treated? Will it get better?
- What should I do if someone in my family has a head injury?
- Can I take medicine for the pain after a head injury? If so, what are some safe options?

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