

Guideline for Concussion/Mild Traumatic Brain Injury and Persistent Symptoms

3rd Edition - for adults, +18 years of age



Ontario Neurotrauma Foundation
Fondation ontarienne de neurotraumatologie

Patient Version

This guideline has been created to help with management of concussion/mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI). It is only for management for adults over 18 years of age. 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 (persistent symptoms). It is based on up-to date, quality research evidence, the expertise of providers and the input of patients.

12a) Returning to Activity – Work

The physical, mental and emotional difficulties that are common after a concussion/mTBI can make it difficult to do your regular activities. But it is important to know that some activity is more likely to speed up your recovery than delay it.

For this reason, it is important to return to your regular activities **gradually**, starting within a few days to weeks of your injury. If symptoms return or get worse, reduce the time and intensity of activity, and see if there are better times of day to try 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.

Older or retired adults may find some of the information in this chapter useful to them in the context of return to general activities, including committee, volunteer work, hobbies or recreational activity.

General considerations regarding rest and return to activity

The majority of people can return to work within 1 to 2 weeks after concussion/mTBI. When planning your return to regular activities, both physical and mental activities need to be considered, because both have the potential to make your symptoms worse.

In the early days after your injury, try to avoid activities that have a high cognitive

About rest:

When you first have a concussion/mTBI it is important to rest for the first one or two days. Research is now showing that after two days, it is helpful to gradually increase your level of activity. Doing some light activity can improve your wellness and your mood. As you gradually increase it, make sure it does not bring on or worsen any symptoms.

load. Activities that cause high cognitive load are those that require a lot of attention, concentration, and problem solving. For example:

- Doing work or tasks that need focus or problem-solving
- Reading
- Using a computer or cell phone, watching TV, playing video games
- Being in demanding social situations, such as with too many people

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 a symptom to worsen, reduce your effort for a short while, and then gradually resume the activity at a slower pace.

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.

General considerations for return to work

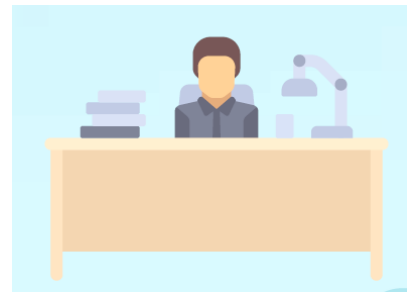
Returning to some form of productive activity as soon as possible after a concussion/mTBI will improve your health and your sense of well-being, as long as it doesn’t put you at risk of another concussion/mTBI. The support of your family, friends and healthcare providers is important to your recovery.

It is important that your employer helps to modify your work environment and expectations of you, based on your medical restrictions, limitations, and symptom triggers.

Symptoms after a concussion/mTBI can be:

- Physical, such as sensitivity to light (photophobia) or sound (sonophobia), or balance and physical fatigue.
- Cognitive, affecting your ability to focus, understand, and remember information. Cognitive difficulties can also affect your ability to multi-task, prioritize, organize, plan, and manage your time.
- Mood related, affecting your ability to be in large groups or busy places, deal with stress, and manage your feelings.

For these reasons, your doctor will help you identify any medical or cognitive restrictions that will require accommodations at work. The aim of this is to prevent any injuries from happening to you and those you work with, as well as any damage to the equipment you use at work.



For example, if you have poor balance, a reasonable medical restriction would be “no working at heights”. Similarly, if you have poor concentration or visual difficulties, a reasonable medical restriction would be “no operation of heavy equipment”. If you have difficulty with screens, you may require a blue light screen protector and a desk lamp rather than florescent lighting.

Examples of work accommodations include:

- Help with commuting to and from work
- Flexible work hours (such as starting later or ending earlier)
- Gradual work re-entry (such as starting at 2 half days per week and increasing gradually)
- Additional time to finish tasks

- A quiet space available for breaks throughout the day
- Temporary change of job
- Environmental modifications (such as quieter work environment, more supervision, less computer work, working from home, only day shift hours)

Your doctor or healthcare provider will help you create a plan to help you return to work. The goal of this plan is to allow you to work without making your symptoms worse or bringing on new symptoms. The plan that is right for you will depend on the work that you do and the symptoms you have.

Depending on your medical restrictions and limitations, or work accommodations, you may need to have a vocational evaluation. This is especially likely if your job could put your safety or the safety of others at risk, or if your work requires you to make a lot of difficult decisions. This type of evaluation will look at the following:

- your ability to function mentally and socially
- work demands
- work environment
- support you are receiving
- factors that are likely to help or make it difficult for you to return to work

Social connection and having a sense of purpose are important to a person's well-being. If persistent symptoms make it difficult for you to return to work, there are other options you may want to consider, such as retraining, taking a course or doing volunteer work.