



## Patient education: Head injury in children and adolescents (The Basics)

### What causes head injuries in children and adolescents?

The most common causes of head injuries in young people are:

- Falls
- Car accidents
- Bicycle accidents
- Sports
- Beatings or other kinds of physical abuse

Children recover from most bumps on the head without problems. But children who hit their head really hard can have serious problems. For example, some children with head injuries have a mild form of brain injury called a "concussion."

### When should I call a doctor or nurse?

You should call a doctor or nurse if your child has hit their head and the injury was more than a light bump.

You should see a doctor right away if your child hurt their head and:

- Fell from a height taller than 3 to 5 feet
- Is younger than 6 months old
- Throws up more than once
- Has a seizure or passes out
- Has a headache that is really bad or gets worse over time
- Has trouble walking, talking, or seeing, seems confused, or is acting in ways that worry you
- Is still dizzy after a while
- Has blood or watery fluid coming out of the nose or ears
- Has a cut that keeps bleeding after you put pressure on it for 10 minutes
- Is weak or numb in any body part
- Is very cranky or can't stop crying
- Has trouble waking up
- Was hit really hard or with something moving very fast

### Is there anything I can do on my own to help my child after a head injury?

Yes. If the injury was not serious, you can:

- Have your child lie down, do something quiet, or nap
- Have your child drink clear liquids if they have thrown up
- Press on the injury with a clean cloth or gauze, if there is bleeding. Hold the pressure for 10 minutes.
- Put ice or a cold pack on any lumps or swollen areas. Hold it there for 20 minutes.
- Give your child pain medicine, such as [acetaminophen](#) (sample brand name: Tylenol) or [ibuprofen](#) (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin)

Watch your child closely after a head injury. If the injury gets worse or your child starts acting strangely, call the child's doctor right away. You can also go straight to the hospital.

### Are there tests my child should have?

Your doctor or nurse will decide which tests your child should have based on their age, symptoms, and individual situation. Most children with head injuries do not need an imaging test, such as an X-ray or MRI. Still, if the doctor or nurse suspects serious injury, they might order a special kind of X-ray called a CT scan (also called a "CAT scan"). CT scans create detailed pictures of the brain and skull. They can show internal bleeding or bone fractures.

### How are head injuries treated in children and adolescents?

That depends on how serious the injury is and what symptoms the child has. Often, the doctor will just want to wait and watch the child.

### Can my child go back to normal activities after a head injury?

That depends on how serious the injury is. If your child has a concussion, they should not play sports until a doctor says it's OK. If your child has had 2 concussions in a row, check with your child's doctor before letting them go back to normal activities.

### Can head injuries in children and adolescents be prevented?

Here are some safety tips that can reduce your child's chances of getting a head injury. Make sure they:

- Always wears a helmet when sitting in a bicycle seat or when being towed behind a bicycle in a trailer. The helmet should fit well ([figure 1](#)). If the helmet has been in a crash, you should throw it away.
- Is watched closely while biking until they are old enough to ride a bicycle alone
- Doesn't bike in the street unless they can control a bicycle. The child should also be able to follow traffic rules.
- Always sits in a car seat or booster seat until they are 4 feet, 9 inches tall. Make sure the seat is secured and set up the right way.
- Cannot fall down stairs or out of windows higher than the first floor. Gates and guards can protect young children.
- Knows how to cross streets by looking both ways for cars. Young children should never cross streets alone.
- Wears safety gear while skateboarding, skiing, or doing other sports. Gear includes helmets, mouth guards, and eyewear (glasses or goggles).

## GRAPHICS

### Bicycle helmet fit



A properly fitting bicycle helmet should rest just above the eyebrows and not slide around on the head. The straps of the helmet should be adjusted to form a "Y" just under the ear of the child. The chin strap should be snug enough to pull down on the helmet when the child opens the mouth wide.

