

**Prevention on the Brain: How to Protect Yourself from Concussions and Other Injuries**

**by Tom Causer, Trauma Coordinator, Conemaugh Memorial Medical Center**

When you think about your health, some of the first things that probably come to mind are healthy eating, exercise, visits with a provider and other steps to help prevent and manage illness and disease. But there is another important factor to consider when thinking about maintaining good health – preventing injuries.

Injuries are one of the biggest threats to good health. According to the National Safety Council, preventable injuries are the third leading cause of death in the U.S., behind heart disease and cancer. In 2019, there were 48.3 million nonfatal, preventable injuries for which people sought medical attention; and preventable, injury-related deaths numbered more than 173,000. The majority of those preventable injuries were found to occur at home or in a motor vehicle.

**Concussions**

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 30 percent of all injury-related deaths can be attributed to traumatic brain injuries (TBI), which can involve a bump or blow to the head or a penetrating head injury that interferes with brain function. Approximately 150 Americans die from TBI-related injuries each day, and even those who survive may suffer from disabilities that can last a lifetime.

A common form of TBI is a concussion, which results from a jolt or hit to the head or a hit to the body. When someone experiences a concussion, the head and brain suddenly and quickly move back and forth, causing the brain to bounce or twist in the skull. This can result in chemical changes and even stretching and damaging of brain cells.

Signs and symptoms of a concussion include:

- Inability to remember events before or after a hit or fall
- Appearing dazed or stunned
- Loss of memory
- Difficulty concentrating
- Confusion
- Clumsiness
- Responding slowly to questions
- Losing consciousness
- Behavior and mood changes
- Headache or feeling pressure in the head
- Nausea
- Balance issues or dizziness
- Double or blurry vision
- Sensitivity to light or noise
- Not “feeling right” or “feeling down”

Symptoms can show up shortly following an injury or days later, so it's important to stay alert to the signs and seek necessary medical care following an injury – especially if a danger sign appears. These can include one pupil being larger than the other; drowsiness; an inability to wake up; a headache that gets worse and does not go away; slurred speech; weakness, numbness or decreased coordination; repeated vomiting or nausea; convulsions or seizures; unusual, confused or agitated behavior; and loss of consciousness. If one or more of these occurs, you should call 9-1-1 or take the injured person to the emergency department for medical attention.

### **Prevention**

The good news is that many injuries are preventable and there are a number of proactive steps you can take to help protect yourself and others and stay injury-free, including:

- Practicing strength and balance exercises
- Regular eye exams
- Making your home safer with adequate lighting and removing easily tripped-over items
- Practicing safe behaviors when engaging in physical activity, including safe play and using proper protective gear (including helmets while biking, skateboarding, etc.)
- Using seat belts every time you are in a motor vehicle, and utilizing car and booster seats appropriately for kids 12 and under, and
- Avoiding driving after drinking alcohol or using drugs.

Senior adults and adults managing certain disabilities can also benefit from installing grab bars in the bathroom and railings on both sides of stairs, as well as talking to their provider about other ways to prevent falls at home.

As the saying goes, “accidents happen,” but by taking simple steps and practicing safe behaviors, you can help yourself and others avoid preventable injuries and stay on the road to good health.

*When emergencies strike, Conemaugh Memorial Medical Center is here to help. Our Emergency Department is open 24/7 every day of the year to care for you when you need it most.*