

Name: _____

Not Just a Bump on the Head

By Sara Aase

How does a blow to the head cause concussion (traumatic brain injury)? “Think about the brain as an egg yolk inside a shell,” says Dr. Michael Collins, assistant director of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Sports Medicine Concussion Program. “If you hit your head or have sudden acceleration or deceleration, the brain will shake inside the cavity of the skull.” With head injuries happening to 1 in 10 high school athletes playing contact sports, concussions are a coach’s constant fear. Plus, kids and teens heal more slowly from concussions than professional athletes do, Collins says. “The younger brain is more vulnerable,” he explains.

Symptoms of concussion may include:

- ✓ confusion
- ✓ memory loss
- ✓ disorientation
- ✓ headache
- ✓ dizziness
- ✓ sleep or concentration problems
- ✓ sensitivity to light
- ✓ just feeling “off”
- ✓ loss of consciousness
- ✓ loss of coordination
- ✓ nausea.

If you suffer a blow to the head, seek immediate medical attention and don’t return to that day’s play or practice—doing so puts you at much greater risk for further brain injury. For someone who already has a concussion but doesn’t know it, a bump can make things worse. That’s what happened to Alex Zordich, 14, who knocked his head three times in one year and then had to sit out the football season. His main symptom was headaches.

Collins says it’s important to make sure an athlete displays no such potential concussion symptoms while at rest or while exercising. “I didn’t know that running and working out could stop the healing process of [a] concussion,” Alex says. “I had it almost a whole year and it would not heal because I kept aggravating it.”

Your Turn

One Friday, your buddy Jamie takes a rough blow in a soccer game and hits the ground with a “Thud!” Initially unconscious, Jamie comes to after a few seconds but feels dizzy and nauseous, and sits out the rest of the game. On Monday, Jamie shows up at practice eager to play, despite having had headaches over the weekend and trouble concentrating on homework. The coach suspects a concussion and recommends a week off to rest, but this does not sit well with Jamie: “Look at football players! They hit their heads all the time and get right back in the game. I want to play!” How would you help Jamie understand how serious a concussion can be? Write your answers on a separate piece of paper.