

Patient information factsheet

Leisure activities after a head injury

It's important to take care when you return to leisure activities after a head injury. Your surgeon will advise you when you can return to sport and leisure activities.

Contact sports

Avoid contact sports for six months. Contact sports include rugby, football, martial arts, boxing and any other high-risk sporting activity such as bungee jumping. If you have a skull fracture or bone flap, it will take three months to stabilise and strengthen. Bruising and swelling of the brain normally settles after three weeks. After the injury, you may experience changes in sensation, such as pins and needles and dizziness, which can affect your ability to play sport safely. Giving the injury time to heal will assist with your overall performance. It is likely you will have lost your previous fitness level and some muscle strength, resulting in rapid physical tiredness.

Swimming

It is safe to swim as long as someone is with you and is aware of the increased risk of epilepsy after a head injury. If you have a cerebrospinal fluid leak, an open head wound or a ruptured ear drum, you should not swim until it has healed.

Scuba diving

It is not safe to dive if you suffer from epilepsy, intracranial air or a cerebrospinal fluid leak. Make sure you check with a registered diving medical group that you are safe to dive and are covered by medical insurance. A letter from your surgeon may be required.

Horse riding and other sports requiring a helmet

Horse riding should be treated like any other high-risk or contact sport. It is essential to wear a helmet for horse riding and sports such as cycling, skate boarding, roller blading, skiing and snowboarding. We do not recommend horse riding or participating in any contact sports if you have had bone flap removal surgery.

Computer, TV and cinema

It is a myth that watching TV, going to the cinema or using a computer is bad for someone who has suffered from a head injury. Even if you have been diagnosed with epilepsy, it is still extremely rare for flickering lights to cause a fit. Use common sense when spending any length of time at a computer or watching TV.

Flying and going abroad

Some people may find that flying makes their symptoms worse. If you intend to fly within three months of your injury, check with your doctor or the head injury specialist nurses, especially if you have suffered seizures, bleeding within the brain or a skull fracture. Other things to consider when flying are the length of the flight and the number of flights you will be taking. It is important to follow the air travel advice regarding deep vein thrombosis (DVT), especially if flying a long distance. Be aware that travel insurance may be affected by the injury and some companies require an additional premium. Charities such as Epilepsy Action, the National Epilepsy Association and Headway can provide you with lists of suitable travel insurance companies.

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Fairground rides

Fairground rides, which involve sudden movement at high speed, are best avoided especially if you have injured your neck.

Alcohol and drugs

After a head injury, your brain will find it harder to cope with the effects of alcohol. You are therefore likely to get drunk very quickly. This also applies to the effects of recreational drugs. Alcohol and illegal drugs can lower the brain's seizure tolerance and therefore increase the likelihood of having a fit. The risk from falling after drinking alcohol is far greater and should be taken into consideration especially after head injury. Some drugs issued over the counter at the chemist can have enhanced effects following head injury and should not be taken at the same time as alcohol. Make sure to check this with the pharmacist.

Smoking

Smoking is bad for your health. Chest infections following head injury in the early part of recovery are more common in people who smoke.

Driving

If you have not been given specific advice regarding return to driving, we would recommend you contact the DVLA before you drive a car, motorbike or ride a bicycle on the road. Only consider these activities once you feel you have completely recovered from your injury.

Sex

You can have sex as soon as you and your partner feel like it.

Long-term problems

Most patients recover quickly from their injury and experience no long-term problems. However, some people may go on to experience delayed complications. If you find you are experiencing difficulties, such as problems with your thinking, memory and concentration or changes in your mood, then please discuss this with your GP and contact the head injury nurse specialist.

Follow-up

Some patients will also need to be seen in an outpatient clinic several weeks after their head injury. You may receive an appointment for this. This will depend on the severity of your head injury. You will be advised if you need a follow-up.

Further information

If you have any head injury concerns or queries please contact your neurosurgical consultant or the head injury nurse specialist (Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 4.30pm) via the hospital switchboard on telephone: **02380 777 222** or on the numbers given during your stay in hospital. Further information on head injuries is available from Headway, a national charity. Telephone Headway Southampton on **023 8086 2948** or go to **www.headway.org.uk**

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