

*Concussion can happen to anyone at any time. Read below to learn how some simple dietary habits can support the recovery and performance of your brain.*



## **Concussions and simple Nutritional changes that can help get you back into the game of life**

**By Jessica Helton**

With the water skiing, wakeboarding, mountain biking and hiking season upon us, have you thought of what nutrition could do to help your brain if you were to hit your head? We have all heard someone say they have “had their bell rung” or perhaps you yourself have experienced a head injury, collectively termed a concussion. A concussion is traumatic brain injury that alters the way our brain functions. Many of us have read in the news headlines about professional athletes suffering these types of injuries from playing contact sports, but did you know you can suffer a concussion without any direct blow to your head? Yes, that does mean that when you were playing flag football with the guys last week, and someone got a bit competitive and tackled you, your brain may have suffered an injury. Some symptoms of a concussion can include headache, dizziness, nausea, fatigue and ringing in the ears.

With all of this in mind, you have determined that you yourself or someone you know has in fact suffered a concussion, what do you do? It can be very difficult to weed through all the advice people will give as to how to proceed and get your brain back to fighting shape. One of the easiest steps you can take to help your brain is look at your nutrition. Don't worry, I'm not saying that you need to eat only kale salads and start juicing tomorrow. Instead, cutting out some processed foods and increasing the nutritious ones can make a huge impact on your brain health. Here are some tips and foods that you can eat to help you recover.

First and foremost, unprocessed and unrefined foods are the most beneficial to not only your brain but your body. That will ensure you consume adequate calories and nutrients necessary for a healthy body. By avoiding sugar and fat filled pre-packaged foods, you will avoid the sugar highs and crashes which can often magnify the feelings of fatigue

associated with a concussion. Bouts of nausea can often lead to a decreased appetite, try to eat a few small meals throughout the day with snacks between meals. By eating smaller meals it is easier to consume your adequate calories without the daunting task of a turkey dinner with all the trimmings.

Putting the focus of each meal or snack on protein can help the body recover from a concussion, because protein helps the body repair and re-build tissue. With that being said, I do not mean to imply that eating a T-bone for 6 meals a day is the way to go. Protein can be found in animal sources such as; lean meats, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy (yogurt, low fat cheese, milk). It is also found in many non-animal sources such as; nuts, seeds, beans, and lentils. Obviously it is not healthy to just eat a hunk of meat for dinner. Good food-combining with complex carbohydrates and healthy fats will create a well rounded meal.

Most of us get up in the morning and have our latte, but when we have suffered a concussion we must put down the cup and break that routine. Water is so important to our bodies in daily life but even more so when we are trying to heal our brain. Caffeine, alcohol, pop and juice should be avoided as they can dehydrate the body and often contain high amounts of sugar. Try to consume at least 2.0 L of water as a minimum. I often hear people say, "I just do not like the taste of regular water." If you fall into this category, try adding a lemon wedge or some frozen fruit. Frozen strawberries or blackberries keep your water cool and provide a tasty bit of natural sweetness.

In recent years, Omega-3 fatty acids have received a lot press because they help to decrease elevated levels of triglycerides which can help to decrease your risk of heart disease. So what do Omega-3 fatty acids have to do with our brain health? Research has shown, that Omega-3s help to reduce inflammation, improve brain function, and improve memory. A lot of us are likely already eating good sources of Omega-3's without even knowing it. Salmon, pumpkin seeds, walnuts, and ground flax seeds are all loaded with Omega-3s.

When we suffer a brain injury we require more antioxidants because the stress of an injury causes increases in oxidative damage on the body. Antioxidants contain an array of Vitamins and Minerals most of which we are already consuming without even making the conscious decision to eat them. Carrots, broccoli, sweet potatoes, cantaloupe, kale and peaches are all great sources of Vitamin A and Carotenoids, and when prepared correctly or eaten by themselves are delicious snacks or sides. Citrus fruits and strawberries are of course a great source of Vitamin C, and really easy to find for a great price at your local grocery store during the summer season. Not only are nuts and seeds a great source of protein they are also filled with Vitamin E. Berries and grapes are a great source of flavonoids and polyphenols. Zinc and Selenium are important minerals and are found in common food sources such as; fish and seafood, lean meat, whole grains, eggs, and poultry.

Now that I have given you quite a daunting grocery list of healthy foods. Here are some meal and snack ideas that should make this whole nutrition "thing" a little easier:

Breakfast: 2 whole eggs, 2 pieces of whole grain toast with Almond Butter (check the label for added sugar!) and 1 glass of water with lemon

Snack: 1 cup of berries (strawberries, blueberries, blackberries), 1/2 cup of Plain Yogurt (greek or regular, just not a flavored yogurt), and 2 tbsp of ground Flaxseed

Lunch: Skinless chicken breast ( ~ the size of palm), 2 cups of spinach or spring mix with peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, avocado and 1 tbsp dressing (try 1/2 tbsp of olive oil + 1/2 tbsp of balsamic vinegar). Try adding some walnuts or pumpkin seeds to your Salad for a delicious crunch.

Snack: 5 whole grain crackers, 2 tbsp. hummus + carrots, peppers, broccoli, and cauliflower

Dinner: Salmon (~ the size of palm), 1/2-1cup of quinoa or whole grain rice, steamed or grilled vegetables (carrots, peppers, mushrooms, etc..)

Even if you do not need to follow these tips for a concussion, consider adding some of these foods into your daily diet anyways. What is good for our brain and body every day leads to a healthier life.

*When dealing with concussion, seeking early treatment is paramount in helping to ensure the maximum recovery within the minimum time frame, as well as preventing serious re-injury. If you or a member of your family participates in a sport where concussion is a possibility, contact any of our Momentum Health locations to arrange a SCAT pre injury consultation. If you think a concussion may have already occurred, please contact our offices to book a consultation or assessment.*

### **Jessica Helton-Kinesiologist**



Jessica graduated from the University of Lethbridge in 2013 with her Bachelors of Science degree, majoring in Kinesiology, and has been working in private practice since graduation. During her time at the University of Lethbridge she worked with the Varsity Women's Rugby and Hockey teams as a Student Therapist. Jessica believes in a holistic approach to health and is always learning new manual therapy techniques that will benefit the overall treatment plan for her patients. Jessica is currently studying to become a holistic nutritionist, and enjoys discussing nutrition with her patients.

Jessica enjoys spending time outdoors camping, hiking and cross country skiing. She also enjoys staying active through running, yoga and volunteering as a disabled ski instructor.