

# Bowdoin College Concussion Policy

Concussions are an increasingly common medical issue affecting the Bowdoin community. They can occur in many settings, not just in athletics. This document is intended for those who suffer concussions as well as the faculty and staff who work with them. The policy covers medical aspects, prognosis, treatment, academic adjustments, and recommendations for students with concussions.

**PHYSIOLOGY & SYMPTOMS:** A concussion is a traumatic brain injury involving a direct or indirect hit to the head or body. When the hit occurs, the brain shifts inside the skull. The impact can lead to chemical and cellular changes in the brain that cause a number of symptoms. Any concussion, including incidents that do not involve loss of consciousness, needs to be taken seriously.

In general, concussion symptoms fall into four categories and can include:

- Physical symptoms: headache, nausea, balance problems, dizziness, blurry vision, fatigue, and noise or light sensitivity.
- Cognitive symptoms: difficulty concentrating, difficulty remembering, feeling mentally slow, and difficulty thinking clearly.
- Emotional symptoms: irritability, sadness, or nervousness.
- Sleep disturbances: trouble falling asleep, sleeping too much, or sleeping too little.

Any combination of these symptoms can occur. Symptoms can appear right away or may not appear until a few days after the incident.

**PROGNOSIS:** Concussions have a wide range of outcomes. No two recoveries will look the same. Most people with a concussion will fully recover within 2 weeks. Students with an underlying psychiatric condition, chronic health issue, learning disability, or history of prior concussion are at increased risk of a longer recovery. Individualized academic adjustments are the standard of care, leading to a faster, more successful recovery.

**DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT:** When a student is seen at Health Services for a concussion, information is collected and a physical exam is done. The diagnosis of concussion is based on having a mechanism for injury and symptoms that fit the known pattern. The first step in treatment has traditionally been relative rest (“brain rest”) and removal from activities, typically for 24-48 hours. After that, students can begin to gradually resume academic activities. Students are advised to stop activities that significantly worsen concussion symptoms.

**RECOVERY AND ACADEMICS:** Following relative rest, the typical plan for resuming academic activities follows this progression:

- Non-academic reading, 15-20 minute blocks at a time
- Academic reading, 15-20 minute blocks at a time
- Non electronic academic work (ex. problem sets, written outlines or worksheets)
- Class attendance, initially classes that do not involve power points, computer screens, movies/music, or detailed labs
- Class attendance including screens
- Completing work with computers

The return to academic work is largely self-directed. Students have ultimate responsibility for adjusting their work limits. Students need to communicate directly with professors about where they are in their recovery.

Students are usually seen for follow up visits every 2-3 days at Health Services as they recover. Health Services staff communicate with the Office of the Dean of Students and Athletics (if appropriate) after each visit, noting progress and requesting an update be sent to all professors. This ensures that everyone (student, Deans office, Health Services staff, and Athletics) has the same expectations.

**ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENTS:** Student needs can vary greatly based on their particular set of symptoms and underlying baseline challenges or conditions. Examples of adjustments that could be offered by faculty on an individualized and temporary basis:

- extensions on assignments, papers, or presentations
- rest breaks during class or exams
- permission to simply attend and observe class without active participation
- help with access to class notes
- printed texts or Power Point materials
- audiobook versions of assigned readings
- allow use of a recorder in class
- extended time for exams or quizzes

In limited circumstances, concussions may be considered temporary disabilities eligible for academic accommodations (See FAQs: <https://www.bowdoin.edu/accessibility/student-accessibility-office/faq.html>)

**ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDENTS:**

- Get extra sleep. Naps are okay, but try to maintain a regular sleep schedule. Stay well-hydrated and eat healthy foods. Avoid alcohol and other recreational substances.
- Try to avoid stimulating places on campus like the dining hall. Ask a friend or roommate to bring meals. Wear sunglasses when exposed to bright lights.
- Avoid electronic screens, moving images, texting, and heavy physical activity. Postpone unnecessary travel, including driving a car.
- Protect yourself from further head injury (i.e. wear a helmet when cycling)
- Write things down to help you remember. Do one thing at a time. Ask for help from friends and/or family.
- Resources for students on campus: the Office of the Dean of Students, Counseling Services, and the Baldwin Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT.)

**EXERCISE AND CONCUSSIONS:** Exercise has traditionally been discouraged until a student is symptom-free (including students participating in college-sanctioned sports). It is now recognized that an abrupt cessation in physical activity can cause some symptoms to worsen. Current recommendations do allow for limited light aerobic activity (ex. walking or stationary biking), provided the activity does not exacerbate symptoms. Student athletes follow a strict protocol for return to play that is managed by athletic trainers. Recreational student athletes are given similar recommendations.

**SUMMARY:** Residential college can be a challenging venue for concussion recovery. Relative rest and a reduction in cognitive stimuli are recommended, but competing academic, sports, and social demands can make this difficult. College students may also have behavior patterns that can negatively impact healing. A community-based support system is the best approach to help students recover from a concussion as well as to thrive when healthy.