

When to Go to the Hospital



Going to the hospital after a head injury can mean the difference between life and death - when in doubt, go to the hospital. Not later. Not tomorrow. Now! Here's why.

The hospital is the only place that has a CT scanner that can "look" inside your head and determine if there is any bleeding in your brain. Bleeding in the brain can be life-threatening when there is enough blood in the right spot to press down on the brain and squeeze it. Because the brain is trapped inside the skull, slow bleeding can force important parts of the brain against the inside of the skull and through the small hole in the base of the skull called the foramen magnum. These important brain areas, which control breathing and heart rate, stop working when they get squeezed and this is what results in death. With a CT scan, epidural and subdural hematomas are easily diagnosed. The treatment requires surgery to remove the blood clot. The quicker the surgery, the better the chances for a good outcome.

So, how do you know when to go to the hospital? The decision is easy if you're the one making it for someone else and that person

is not responding to you or looks asleep. This is called coma. The risk of a subdural or epidural hematoma in comatose head injured patients is high and you should summon an ambulance immediately!

But what if the head injury doesn't cause a coma? What if the head injury just causes a brief loss of consciousness, brief period of amnesia, or a sensation of feeling dazed? A person who has such an injury — termed concussion or mild traumatic brain injury — can look, and even feel, just fine. The problem is, even though the person looks good on the outside, inside the skull there is a small chance that slow bleeding is taking place. After a concussion, the chances of this happening are not large — about 1 in 1000 — but the only way to diagnose it is with that hospital-based CT scan.

Here are the symptoms of a concussion that should prompt an immediate trip to the hospital or emergency department.

- Loss of consciousness, even if only briefly
- Any period of amnesia, or loss of memory for the event
- Feeling dazed or confused
- Headache
- Vomiting
- Seizure
- In addition, for children under 2 years of age, any scalp swelling or abnormality in the way they usually behave.

One word of caution: because any brain injury — even a concussion — has the potential to injure the brain, the brain-injured patient may lack the judgment to make an informed decision regarding whether or not to go to the hospital. Family and friends can be instrumental in helping the patient choose a course of action that is best for him or her. And when in doubt, go to the hospital!