

Concussion Protocols for Athletes

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“Concussion management and return to play protocol” refers to a doctor’s approval for an athlete to resume participating within their sport(s). Having these guidelines in place can assist in the overall long- and short-term health of an athlete. According to the [CDC](#), there are six steps in a return to play progression. These steps are to be done in chronological order, and progression should only occur after there are no symptoms completing the steps. The steps are as follows:

Step 1: Back to regular, everyday activities.

Step 2: Light aerobic activity, meaning roughly 5-10 minutes on a bike or walking.

Step 3: Moderate activity. This is when an athlete can start including jogging or other moderate intensity exercise.

Step 4: Heavy, non-contact activity. This would be sprints, weightlifting, or any other high intensity exercise not including physical contact.

Step 5: Practice and full contact. The athlete can then return to full practice as normal before the injury.

Step 6: Competition. This is the final step, allowing the athlete to compete in their sport as normal during a game or match.

Once return to normal play has been met without any symptoms, continuous monitoring is not required. However, if additional symptoms occur, it is best to be seen by a specialist.

Although concussion management and return to play protocols serve a great purpose, in 2020, an [article](#) was published by The Ohio State University regarding the barriers to states’ implementation of concussions laws in high school sports. Among several barriers that were evaluated in the study, a prominent barrier is the lack of education and understanding of

concussions in both the schools and athletes themselves. Most states now, such as South Carolina, have a concussion law that has tried to implement more knowledge within foundational youth of a sport.

In the state of South Carolina, a student athlete [concussion law](#) went into effect June 7, 2013. The law requires that fact sheets on concussions and removal requirements be administered to all coaches, volunteer coaches, athletes, parents, and legal guardians of children participating in sports. It also required that if an athlete sustains a concussion, they are required to have a written medical clearance in order to return to the first of six steps as stated above. In accordance with the law, any medical professional, such as athletic trainers, physician, physician assistant, or nurse practitioner who evaluates the athlete will not be liable for civil damages unless the omission to act is conducted in a grossly negligent or willful, wanton disregard for patient's health.

[Gross negligence](#) involves a reckless disregard for the safety or lives of others, and the intent to do wrongful harm. Medical professionals and coaches who refuse to abide by the standards of care could be liable for gross negligence. In a case that took to trial in [2021](#), within Horry County South Carolina, a football player sustained a traumatic brain injury on the football field after coaches and officials failed to remove him from the game after obvious signs of a concussion. The jury found two separate occurrences of gross negligence by Horry County School District, one being the failure to have an athletic trainer present and a second for the failure to assess for signs and symptoms of a concussion. The court did not find the County grossly negligent in failing to train the coaches in concussion protocols; however, they did conclude that any coach who fails to assess the signs and symptoms of a concussion would be liable for injury to those athletes.

Cases such as this one show just how valuable catching signs and symptoms of concussions are, particularly alongside abiding by the laws required within the state one resides. This case helps to piece together just what the South Carolina Concussion Law means in regards to being grossly negligent when a concussions takes place. Although this case did not have an ending with the athlete ever returning to the football field, having a concussion law and requirements for return to play ensures that as a society so focused on youth sports, we continue to prioritize the youth rather than the sport. Lives have been taken away and severely altered by the lack of knowledge and lack of abiding by the regulations prior to, and even after, laws have been passed. Laws get broken every day, but lives do not get to restart once harm has been done.

The biggest issue today is the application of concussion protocol to a younger age group. Most states only require these protocols in high school sports; however, all youth aged athletes are at a substantial risk for long term effects from concussions. According to the [National Athletic Trainers' Association](#), within the 2015-2016 and 2019-2020 school year, middle school sports have an overall higher rate of concussions than high school and collegiate sports.

All in all, concussions are a dangerous force to be reckoned with. If you think you or someone you know may have sustained a concussion either recently or in the past, check out these resources to find the help you may need.

[Concussion Legacy Foundation](#)

[American Academy of Neurology](#)

[Concussion Resource Center](#)