

Physical therapy can help concussion recovery

By **Jim Cornelius**
Editor in Chief

Awareness of the risks and effects of concussions has grown tremendously in recent years. From the NFL down to high school sports, coaches, players and parents have learned the principle of “when in doubt, sit it out” when it comes to head injuries. The potential repercussions of multiple concussions have made it imperative to heal from an injury before getting back on the playing field.

Physical therapist Laura Ahmed of Step & Spine Physical Therapy has experienced those changes firsthand — as an athlete and as a therapist. She is an expert in the treatment of concussions.

“I’ve had concussions myself, and the way this was managed 15 years ago and the way it’s managed now is *very* different,” she said. “It’s been a really cool time, because it really changed.”

Rest protocols and protocols for returning to a sport or to work are part of the change — and so is a recognition that physical therapy may be an important tool in concussion recovery.

“Every person is different when it comes to this injury,” Ahmed said. And the same person may respond differently to a new injury. Each injury is its own thing.”

Early recognition of a concussion is extremely important, especially in avoiding a second injury on top of the first. That, Ahmed says, “can make a huge difference in the length and complexity of their recovery.”

Ahmed emphasizes that, while youth sports has gotten a lot of attention around this issue of late, concussions can happen to anyone — from a fall or from car accidents or a work-related mishap.

“This isn’t just a teenaged athlete’s injury,” she said.

A case in point was provided by Step & Spine: their successful treatment of Sisters resident Randell (Randy) Drake.

Drake, an electrician and a military veteran, experienced 40 years of blackouts, dizziness, nausea, headaches, and significant neck pain.

His time serving in the military during the Vietnam War resulted in several head injuries that caused his debilitating symptoms. Then, in 1978, a severe car accident left Drake with an open skull fracture.

“My car accident reopened the unhealed wounds I had from my time in the military,” he said.

He spent years visiting doctor after doctor only to receive pain medication and a couple

of physical therapy appointments. Nothing seemed to make a difference. As a last resort, his doctor gave him nerve-blocking injections that should have helped ease the debilitating symptoms he experienced throughout the day.

They didn’t.

Over the years, Drake began to accept that this was his new normal. He resigned himself to the fact that he would no longer be able to bike, ride horses, go backpacking or ride his motorcycle. Even walks were not possible because of the constant pain in his neck.

For unrelated knee pain, Randy went to see a physical therapist at Step & Spine Physical Therapy’s Sisters clinic. As he progressed into

single leg exercises, the therapist noticed he was having some trouble with balance and dizziness.

The cause for Randy’s symptoms was not clear-cut. His dizziness could be attributed to arthritis in his neck, also known as cervicogenic dizziness, as well as vestibular dysfunction. Anytime Randy looked up, something he frequently did as an electrician, a dizziness episode would occur. These episodes would cause his world to spin for up to five minutes at a time and would often cause blackouts. But Randy’s dizzy spells weren’t all related, which made finding the cause more challenging.

The therapist began treating Randy using vestibular habituation. The results were

good, but he plateaued after a few treatments. When Nicole started working on his neck, Randy’s progress moved into hyperspeed.

By relieving his general stiffness with manual techniques and incorporating exercises to strengthen and minimize joint hypomobility, therapy provided a light at the end of a very dark tunnel. For the first time in 40 years, Drake felt significant relief in his neck, which resolved his headaches and reduced his dizziness.

Today, Randy’s quality of life is steadily increasing. He has learned invaluable tools for managing his symptoms and knows what to do to prevent dizziness and blackouts.

Drake’s case may be extraordinary, but it points up

the value of physical therapy for recovery. Neck work, work on balance and “properly dosed cardio exercise” help people return to an active life.

Ahmed notes that this has important psychological as well as physical effects.

“It can be a really hard thing to go through when you feel like you can’t do any of your regular activities,” she said.

While awareness of the seriousness of concussion is much greater than it was just a short time ago, Ahmed believes that people are not as aware that active treatment is possible.

“I think that a lot of them (have) no idea that you can treat a concussion now,” she said. “There’s definitely things that can be done to rehabilitate.”

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