My child has hurt their head. What should I do?

Most head injuries in children are not dangerous. If your child was not “knocked out”, is not vomiting, and is playful and active or acting normally, contact your doctor to see if your child needs to be seen in the pediatrician’s office or the emergency department. If your child is not acting normally, did lose consciousness, has been vomiting, takes blood thinning medicine or bleeds easily, it may be more serious and your child should be seen urgently.

How will the doctor know if my child has a concussion, or something more dangerous that might need a CT (also called CAT) scan?

Your doctor will spend time talking to you and your child about what happened, and perform a physical examination to look for certain findings. This process alone can commonly diagnose a concussion and even rule out a dangerous injury. By using published and well-accepted guidance such as the “PECARN” minor head injury rule, which is based on information from thousands of patients, your doctor can more reliably determine the risk of a dangerous injury and discuss further options. In most cases the absence of a serious injury can be determined without getting a CT scan.

What is a concussion?

In simple terms, a concussion occurs when there is force to the head (a direct impact or even a rapid movement without a direct blow, as in a car crash) and the child (or adult) experiences what are called neurologic symptoms. Neurologic symptoms may include headache, slow thought or confusion, nausea or vomiting, dizziness, balance problems, sleepiness, or other features. You should understand that a CT scan does not show that a concussion is present or not. Instead, your doctor will examine your child to determine if they are at risk for another and more serious injury, such as bleeding within the head, which might require testing such as CT scan. Concussions do not commonly pose an immediate danger, but can be concerning for patients and their families as symptoms may linger for several days to weeks. Your doctor can work with you to help you through this time.