

Watch Out for Delayed Symptoms After a Car Accident

Your health should always be your highest priority

Some people involved in car accidents have immediately apparent injuries, while others walk away feeling fine. Some of those who feel fine, though, are *not* fine. It's all too common for symptoms to not become apparent for hours or even days after an accident, and the consequences of such a delayed injury can be catastrophic, both medically and financially.

In short, just because you walked away from a car accident doesn't mean you're out of the woods. Here is what you need to know about delayed symptoms.

Why are symptoms sometimes delayed after an accident?

A car crash or similar accident is a frightening event, and the human body has mechanisms to protect itself in the event of a particularly dangerous or scary situation. Your "fight-or-flight" response (more formally, the *acute stress response*) engages immediately, stimulating the adrenal glands and causing the body to release adrenaline and noradrenaline. The stress response causes your pain perception to drop, which means you may not feel even a significant injury.

In addition to adrenaline masking pain, some injuries just take a while to fully materialize. Swelling and inflammation, for instance, may not be noticeable for some time after the accident, even though the underlying damage is there from the beginning. Damage to certain internal organs may be masked for a time as the undamaged portions of the organs work harder to pick up the slack – until they can't anymore. Moreover, injured people often "take it easy" for some time after a crash, and some symptoms may only become noticeable upon the return to work or regular activities of daily living.

Delayed symptoms to watch out for

In general, after any type of accident, it's important to pay close attention to your body for a few days to make sure nothing feels off. Here are a few specific symptoms to watch out for and what they might mean:

Headaches: A headache could be benign, and it could be unrelated to the accident. People get headaches all the time, after all. However, a headache could also be indicative of a head or neck injury, a blood clot, or a concussion.

Back pain: Because car accidents happen with the driver and passengers in a seated position, the back often experiences a great deal of pressure. Back pain could be a warning sign of a soft tissue injury, whiplash, a herniated disc, or even a spinal cord injury.

Neck and shoulder pain: One of the most common injuries in car accidents, especially rear-end accidents, is whiplash, which can cause pain or stiffness in the neck and

shoulders. Whiplash may go away on its own, but it can also lead to more significant complications. Even more importantly, the violent movement of the head and neck that causes whiplash can also damage the brain or spinal cord.

Abdominal pain: When your body comes to a sudden stop in a car crash, your internal organs keep moving until they hit bone, which can cause damage and internal bleeding. The “fight or flight” response temporarily speeds up blood clotting, so you may not notice the signs of internal bleeding for some time. If you do start feeling abdominal pain, you need to get checked out right away.

Numbness: Accidents can cause nerve damage, and such damage can make it difficult for your brain to communicate with certain parts of the body, causing numbness or tingling. Any sign of a nerve injury needs to be checked out by a doctor immediately to avoid permanent damage.

Behavioral changes: Not all delayed symptoms are physical. Brain injuries can cause changes in mood, personality, and sleep patterns. If you feel off, or if someone close to you expresses concern, you need to be checked for a concussion.

What you need to do after an accident

Delayed symptoms are one of the reasons you absolutely need to see a doctor right away after an accident, even if you feel fine. Go to your primary care provider, an urgent care center, or an emergency room, and tell the provider you see exactly what happened and exactly how you’re feeling. Don’t leave anything out. Even mild discomfort could be a sign of a more serious underlying injury. Follow your doctor’s orders, go to your follow-up appointments, and take your medications as prescribed.

Second, even after you’ve seen a doctor, you need to be cautious and pay attention to your body after an accident. There is always the risk that you could aggravate an injury you didn’t even know you had. For example, if you have a concussion, you are at risk of second impact syndrome, a potentially fatal swelling of the brain that can occur when a second concussion happens before the previous concussion has completely healed. Injuries to other parts of the body can likewise be aggravated if you overexert yourself.

Finally, listen to the people around you. If you’re experiencing behavioral symptoms or subconsciously making physical adjustments to accommodate a hidden injury, you may not even notice it yourself. The people who know you best are also the best positioned to tell if something seems off. Take it seriously and get medical help in the interest of safety.

The legal implications of delayed symptoms

In addition to being the equivalent of a time bomb for your health, injuries with delayed symptoms can make it more difficult to get compensation for your accident. If you broke your arm in a car accident and were immediately treated for it, it’s relatively easy to establish a clear

connection between the crash and the broken arm. However, if you started to experience headaches a few days after the accident, an insurance company can point to the intervening time and argue that something else may have happened in between to cause your headaches.

This is a somewhat disingenuous argument on the insurance company's part – they know perfectly well that symptoms are often delayed – but you still need to be prepared for it. This is why it's important to get medical attention and save copies of every document from your medical provider. Keep your visit summaries, discharge instructions, prescriptions, and doctor's orders. Track your mileage to and from medical appointments. In addition to your medical records, keep your own journal recording your symptoms and the effects they have had on your life.

Finally, remember that the insurance companies have every incentive to delay or reduce claims, so if they can take advantage of a delay in symptoms to question an injury, they probably will. They may ask leading questions like "what else happened to cause that symptom?" or try to get blanket authorization to comb through *all* your medical records for evidence you could be faking or exaggerating your injuries.

The value of an experienced attorney

When your medical situation is in flux after a car accident, an experienced attorney can make all the difference. Your attorney can handle inquiries from the insurance company and protect your rights while you focus on healing. Effective car accident lawyers know how to ask the right questions, recommend the right medical specialists, and work proactively to maximize their clients' recoveries.

In short, it's always in your interest to talk to an experienced attorney about your legal options. There's no pressure and no obligation to hire us, just candid answers about your legal situation. If you've been hurt in a car accident, contact [Smith & Hassler, Attorneys at Law](#) for a free consultation.