

Traumatic Brain Injury Patient Education Resource

What is a traumatic brain injury?

A traumatic brain injury (TBI) is an injury that can change the way the brain works. TBI can affect the way a person thinks and can cause a variety of symptoms. We can see some brain injuries on CT and MRI scans, such as when there is bleeding in or on top of the brain. But there are some brain injuries we can't see in images, such as a concussion.

What are the causes of TBI?

Traumatic brain injuries can occur from any blow to the head, face or neck. It can also happen when a blow to the body causes a sudden jarring or shaking of the head, or from a penetrating injury. Examples of ways TBI happen include falls, car crashes or assaults with blows to the head or shaking. Brain injuries can happen when blood or oxygen to the brain is blocked, such as when a person is strangled.

What are the symptoms of TBI?

A person does not need to be knocked out (lose consciousness) to suffer a TBI. Some people may not remember the details of their injury, even if they stay conscious. Common symptoms include:

Physical:

- Headaches or head pressure
- Dizziness
- Nausea and vomiting
- Blurred or fuzzy vision
- Sensitivity to light or sound
- Balance problems
- Feeling tired or having no energy

Mental:

- Not thinking clearly
- Feeling slowed down

- Difficulty remembering things
- Difficulty working on a computer
- Difficulty reading
- Unable to learn new information
- Difficulty organizing and completing tasks

Emotional:

- Easily upset or angered
- Sadness
- Feeling nervous or anxious
- Feeling more emotional than usual

Sleep-related:

- Sleeping more or less than usual
- Having a hard time falling asleep

Some people with more severe injuries can feel weakness or numbness in their arms or legs or can have seizures. They can have troubles with their vision, hearing, walking or speech. Some people with TBI can be at a higher risk of violence or abuse. Some people with TBI after events such as a car crash or an assault can have flashbacks or nightmares about their injuries.

What should I do if I think I have suffered a TBI?

It is recommended that all people with a suspected TBI should see a medical doctor or nurse practitioner as soon as it is safe.

What can happen if I don't seek medical care for a possible TBI?

People who sustain a TBI and wait to get medical care have some risks. It can delay finding out what type of injury they have, how they can get better and what supports services are available. This can mean symptoms last longer or can lead to permanent disability or death.

What can happen if I get another head injury while recovering from a TBI?

If a person is still healing from a TBI and they get another injury to their head, it can be very dangerous. They can have more severe symptoms (such as worse headaches), symptoms that last a long time or a deadly brain injury.

What can I do to help heal from a TBI?

Children and adults with a TBI need to take time and the appropriate steps to help healing. Here is a list of suggestions:

- ✓ Do activities (both thinking and exercise) at a level that does not make your symptoms worse. Avoid activities with a risk of head injury.
- ✓ Take breaks often, especially if your symptoms feel worse.
- ✓ Drink enough water and eat regular, balanced meals.
- ✓ Get enough sleep.
- ✓ Avoid using drugs and alcohol.
- ✓ Limit the use of over-the-counter pain medications and use only as directed.
- ✓ Take all prescribed medications as directed and go to all medical appointments.
- ✓ Do not return to driving until your medical doctor or nurse practitioner clears you to.
- ✓ Take part in traditional healing practices and ceremonies that do not worsen your symptoms.
- ✓ Reach out to family members and friends you trust for support.
- ✓ Connect with community support groups in person or online, where available.

Some people with TBI need rehabilitation with different types of health professionals. This is often called “interdisciplinary” rehabilitation. Examples of professionals that might help are a physiotherapist, occupational therapist, neuropsychologist, neurologist, neurosurgeon or psychiatrist.

When should I get medical help right away?

If any of these signs or symptoms show up at the time of the injury or while healing from a TBI, go to the nearest emergency department right away.

- Getting more and more confused
- Headache keeps getting worse
- Vomiting more than once
- Seizures
- New or worsening weakness or numbness
- Not waking up
- Problems breathing or swallowing
- New or worsening slurred speech
- New or worsening vision problems
- Strange behaviour

When can someone with a TBI return to activity following injury?

If you are returning to work, school or sport-related activities, it is important to do this one step at a time. Those with TBI who have a job should work with their medical providers on a plan for return to work. The plan may include workplace accommodations, such as breaks or a quiet place to work. Survivors who take part in sports should get medical clearance before returning to activities with a risk of body contact or head injury. This can include full practices and games in sports like soccer, hockey and basketball.

How long will it take to heal?

The time it takes to recover following a TBI can depend on many factors. It can depend on the person's age, sex and gender. It can also depend on any medical conditions they had before the injury (e.g., depression, migraine headaches or a previous brain injury). The severity of the injury, stress, sleep and access to psychological and emotional support and medical care can also affect healing time. No two injuries are the same. Some survivors will recover within weeks or months. Others may experience permanent symptoms or disability that need ongoing care and support.

There are ways to improve a person's health and wellbeing after TBI. This is true even many years after the injury and when some of the effects of TBI are permanent. People with TBI can lead healthy, productive lives.

How can I learn more about traumatic brain injury?

To learn more about brain injury visit the following websites and/or your local brain injury association:

The Abused & Brain Injured Toolkit:

www.abitoolkit.ca

Ontario Neurotrauma Foundation:

www.braininjuryguidelines.org

Parachute:

www.parachute.ca/concussion

Scan this QR code using your mobile device to visit the ABI Toolkit online:

