



Signs and Symptoms of Traumatic Brain Injury

Definitions

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is “a blow or jolt to the head or a penetrating head injury that disrupts the function of the brain” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). There are two basic types of TBI: “open” and “closed.” Open brain injuries are caused by penetrating objects such as bullets or shrapnel fragments. These injuries often result in damage that is localized to the site of the wound (called “focal injury”). Closed brain injuries are more common and are usually caused by motor vehicle crashes or falls. The injury occurs when the head moves rapidly back and forth. The brain bounces off the sides of the skull. The resulting tissue damage is usually throughout the brain. Brain injury varies in terms of severity; therefore, recovery is patient-specific.

Common Terms

Often, the most immediate effect of brain injury is loss of consciousness (LOC). LOC may be for a few seconds, minutes, or hours. A mild TBI (or concussion) can occur when LOC is brief (a few seconds or minutes) or there may be no LOC. While a loss of consciousness is not required for a diagnosis of TBI, some alteration of consciousness is a necessary component. An alteration of consciousness has also been characterized as “getting your bell rung,” “seeing stars” or feeling “dazed.”

Another term that your clinician may use is post traumatic amnesia (PTA). PTA is the period of time from injury until conscious, continuous memory returns. This may last a few minutes to hours, or it may take weeks to months.

Common Symptoms

The following are some common symptoms that a person with a traumatic brain injury may experience. Not all people have all of these symptoms and the severity of the symptoms can vary among people.

Physical

- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Tendency to get tired easily
- Fatigue from having to maintain attention and activity
- Visual impairment
- Change in hearing - difficulty hearing in crowded rooms or ringing in your ears
- Alteration in your sense of taste
- Involuntary muscle tightness and stiffness
- Weakness in one side of the body
- Seizures

Cognitive (thinking processes):

- Memory loss (short and long-term)
- Poor concentration and attention
- Problems initiating, planning and following up (executive functioning)
- Problems in judgement
- Difficulty in recognizing your own limits or changes
- Difficulty in generalizing from a specific time, place, or idea
- Problems with perception and direction, such as feeling disoriented in your position and motion (spatial disorientation)
- Slowness of thought process
- Slowness and/or difficulty with speech
- Increased need for simple, concrete directions

Emotional/Psychosocial (social and psychological behavior):

- Anxiety and/or depression
- Mood swings
- Denial
- Inappropriate behaviors (impulsivity, disinhibition, lack of social judgement and appreciation of subtleties)
- Self-centeredness
- Irritability/agitation/outbursts
- Sexual dysfunction
- Loss of social network/isolation



Recovering from Traumatic Brain Injury

The brain has a remarkable way to adjust after injury. Each brain injury and its recovery is different. You should ask your health care provider what you may expect during your recovery process.

Brain injury rehabilitation assists you in reaching your maximum level of independence. The more independent you are, the higher your quality of life can be. The goal of brain injury rehabilitation is to support the brain's natural healing process. You are the most important member of your rehabilitation team; you have an active part in this process.

Here is a list of tips that can help you in your recovery.

Get plenty of sleep at night, and rest during the day.

Keep a daily journal. Include important events, feelings about daily happenings, and personal reactions. Ask others for feedback about your performance and behaviors. Set realistic weekly goals.

Return to normal activities gradually, not all at once.

Avoid activities that could lead to another brain injury, such as contact or recreational sports, until your doctor says you are well enough to take part in these activities.

Ask your doctor when you can drive a car, ride a bike or operate heavy equipment because your ability to react may be slower after a brain injury.

Ask your doctor about ways to help your superior officer, fellow service members, employer, co-workers, school, friends and/or family understand what happened to you. This will help them provide you the support you need.

Don't drink alcoholic beverages: Alcohol and certain other drugs may slow your recovery and put you at further risk for injury.

If it's harder to remember things, write them down. Start using an organizer, day planner or palm pilot and try to incorporate it into your everyday life. The key is to make using your planner a habit.

If you find you are losing important items, begin putting those items in the same place all the time (e.g. always putting your house keys on a specific shelf in the kitchen). You may want to record in your planner where you place important documents, phone numbers, etc.

If you are easily distracted or have difficulty concentrating, try doing only one thing at a time in a quiet, non-distracting environment. (For example, don't try to study while the TV is on. Clear off your desk so you only have the needed items visible. Don't carry on an important conversation while the radio is on.)

Make sure you take all of your prescribed medication in the correct manner and at the correct times. You may want to consider getting a pillbox that separates your medication into different days and different times of the day. It will help you to know when and if you took your medication last and when your next dose is required.

Consult with family and/or your superior officer before making important decisions.

BE PATIENT!!! Healing from a brain injury takes time.

References:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2006). Facts about traumatic brain injury. Available online at http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/tbi/FactSheets/Facts_About_TBI.pdf

Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center/Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury. (1999). Traumatic brain injury guide for patients and families. Washington, D.C.

This fact sheet is not intended as a substitute for the medical advice of your physician. Consult your doctor regularly about matters concerning your health, particularly regarding symptoms that require diagnosis or immediate medical attention.

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