

HEAD INJURY

(Traumatic Brain Injury)



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

Injury to the head. It involves the scalp, skull, or brain. Head injuries may be external (closed) or internal (penetrating). Head injuries can cause physical problems, cognitive (thinking) dysfunction, or emotional changes. Most head injuries are minor (such as a small bump or "goose egg" on the head), but some can be life-threatening or cause permanent brain damage. Young children, teens, and the elderly are more often affected.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Head injury symptoms may occur right away, or hours or days later. Signs and symptoms can include one or more of the following effects.
- Swelling/bleeding at the site of the injury.
- Fracture of the skull.
- Loss of consciousness (short time or for long period).
- Abnormal breathing.
- Clear or bloody fluid from the nose, mouth, or ear.
- Drowsiness, confusion, irritability, or loss of memory.
- Unable to feel or control muscle function.
- Black-and-blue color around the eyes.
- Vomiting and nausea.
- Changes in vision or speech.
- Pupils of different sizes.
- Dizziness.
- Pain, such as headache or stiff neck.
- Seizure.

CAUSES

- Accidents (motor vehicle, work-related, sports, falls, physical assault, outdoor activities, and in the home).
- Child abuse or shaken baby syndrome.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Alcohol or substance abuse.
- Contact sports, such as football, soccer, or boxing.
- Prior head injury.
- Illnesses that affect balance or walking ability.
- Not using seat belts or not wearing helmets.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Don't drink or use mind-altering drugs and drive.
- Wear protective headgear when head injury is a risk.
- Use your auto seat belt always. Place young children in approved safety car seats.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The outcome will vary depending on a variety of factors (e.g., age, type of injury, severity of symptoms, and treatment). Many head injuries are mild and heal on their own with no lasting effects. Others can be treated successfully. Some may require extended hospital care and long-term rehabilitation.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Permanent physical or mental disabilities, and social and economic problems (such as loss of job).



DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Self-care is sometimes done for mild injuries. Get medical help right away if any of the symptoms listed occur or other head injury symptoms cause concern. Give first aid if needed. Call 911 for emergency help.
- Medical care starts with checking the person's ABCs (airway, breathing, and circulation). Any visible head injuries will be treated. Medical tests usually include testing the person's alertness. Other tests, such as x-ray, CT, or MRI are often done to check for brain damage.
- A person with a mild head injury can be sent home after initial medical care. Someone must stay with the person and watch for serious symptoms over the next 24 hours. Instructions may include waking the patient every 2 to 3 hours to check for alertness. Get medical help if you cannot awaken or arouse the person.
- In other head injuries, the treatment will depend on the severity. Hospital care may be needed for a period of time, and then rehabilitation care may be required.
- To learn more: Brain Injury Association, 1776 Massachusetts Ave, NW, Washington, DC 20036; (800) 444-6443; website: www.biausa.org.

MEDICATIONS

For self-care, you may use acetaminophen for pain or discomfort. Avoid aspirin. It can increase bleeding risk.

ACTIVITY

After treatment, rest as needed. Follow your health care provider's instructions about resuming physical activity.

DIET

Food intake will depend on the extent of injury.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of a head injury or observe them in someone else. Get emergency help if needed!
- After a head injury, you observe any new, changed, or worsening symptoms.

Special notes:

More notes on the back of this page