

Traumatic Brain Injury Facts: TBI & Older Adults

What is a traumatic brain injury (TBI)?

A traumatic brain injury (TBI) occurs as the result of a sudden physical insult to the brain. The injury may be caused by the head forcefully hitting an object such as the dashboard of a car (closed head injury) or by something passing through the skull and piercing the brain, such as a gunshot wound (penetrating head injury). The person may or may not lose consciousness at the time of injury. Often the term "concussion" is used to refer to a mild brain injury.

How many older adults experience a traumatic brain injury?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that each year as a result of TBI, 10,000 older adults (persons age 65 and older) die, 55,000 are hospitalized, and 80,000 visit the Emergency Department. An unknown number of older adults visit a private physician or do not seek care and may have an undiagnosed traumatic brain injury.

Persons age 75 years and older have the highest rates of TBI hospitalization and death (261.0 per 100,000 and 50.0 per 100,000 respectively). The majority of traumatic brain injuries in older adults are caused by falls and motor vehicle crashes.¹

What problems are created by a traumatic brain injury?

The extent and location of the injury largely determines its severity and resulting problems relating to physical, behavioral, or cognitive abilities. Other factors, such as an individual's personality and pre-injury abilities, may affect post-injury behavior. Some of the common consequences of traumatic brain injury include:

- £ Cognitive impairments include difficulty concentrating for varying periods of time, organizing thoughts, and becoming easily confused or forgetful. The person may have difficulty learning new information, be unable to interpret others' actions, and may speak or behave inappropriately for the situation. Many individuals will have difficulty solving problems, making decisions, and planning. After an injury, judgment is often affected.
- £ Language problems include word-finding difficulty, poor sentence formation, lengthy and often faulty descriptions or explanations, and difficulty using language socially such as being confused by humor or sarcasm, monopolizing conversations, or appearing rude. Individuals with traumatic brain injuries are often unaware of their errors. After an injury, an individual may become frustrated or angry and may blame the person with whom he or she are speaking for any communication difficulties. Frequently after a TBI, an individual needs to re-learn how to communicate in a global sense to avoid blurting out whatever one is thinking, take turns in conversation, understand relevancy, and pick up on others' non-verbal cues.
- £ Speech may be slow, slurred, and difficult or impossible to understand.
- £ Sensory losses may include hearing, taste, smell, and vision. Blurred vision, double vision, light sensitivity, and focusing difficulty are typical neurological symptoms, as are nausea, dizziness, spatial disorientation, and problems with attention or concentration.
- £ Balance problems may impair one's ability to stand up, bend over, reach for something, drive a car, or go to the store.