

What Is a Traumatic Brain Injury?

Traumatic brain injuries (TBI) happen when something hits the head hard enough to hurt the brain. Causes include falls, car accidents, and sports injuries, among others. TBIs can be mild – such as a concussion – or more serious. These more serious injuries can cause problems like memory loss, mood changes, trouble focusing, or difficulty moving. Most children get better with time, but severe TBIs can cause long-term problems.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

How common is a traumatic brain injury?

Almost all children bump their heads at some point and are fine. While more serious TBIs aren't that common, head injuries are still one of the leading causes of disability and death in children.

What should I do if I suspect my child has a traumatic brain injury?

Call 911 if you have immediate concerns. Early treatment is important. Young children with TBIs may seem irritable or suddenly lose their words. Even older children and teens can't always explain how they're feeling. If a child seems different or "off" after a head injury, talk to a medical provider. Explain how the injury happened and how your child is feeling and acting.

What kind of help is there for a traumatic brain injury?

Common treatments for TBI include:

- **Rest, ice, and monitoring:** For mild TBIs, icing the injury, taking a break from activities, and watching for problems is often recommended.
- **Medical intervention:** In more serious cases, medication, hospitalization, surgery, or seeing a TBI specialist may be needed.
- **Rehabilitative therapies:** Some TBIs can affect movement, speech, vision, hearing, or taste. Physical, occupational, and speech therapy can often help if this happens.

What other conditions sometimes occur with traumatic brain injury?

Some people with traumatic brain injuries have other conditions such as sleep disorders, emotional changes, physical disabilities, or other neurological issues such as seizures. Be open with the medical provider about all symptoms.

Talking with a Medical Provider

When talking with medical providers or specialists, you might want to:

- **Bring and take notes:** Think of your questions ahead of the visit. While there, write down as much as you can – names, medications, treatments, instructions, etc. Be sure to request a provider summary at the end of the visit.
- **Discuss what is needed and why:** It's important to understand why a medicine or treatment is needed, how it will help your child, and possible side effects.

What You Can Do at Home

Setting up appointments and learning about your child's TBI takes time. There are things you can do while you wait:

- **Take one day at a time:** It's normal to feel sad, frustrated, overwhelmed, or even angry. Be gentle with yourself and your child.
- **Find support:** Reach out to family, friends, and professionals (like teachers, doctors, or therapists) who understand TBI or are willing to learn with you.
- **Make adjustments:** TBIs can be life-changing in many ways. Every situation is different. Be open about what your child and family need. Asking for help and making changes at home can ease the process.

Learning about traumatic brain injuries and getting help is a journey. You're not alone.

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About This Series

This series of handouts on health conditions was written by clinicians in Weill Cornell Medicine's Pediatric Mental Health Integration Program, partners in the ACT for Youth CYSHCN Program Center of Excellence at Cornell University.

