

A Patient's Guide to Understanding Mild Traumatic Brain Injury



What is a Mild Traumatic Brain Injury?

A mild traumatic brain injury results from a blow or jolt to the head that disrupts the normal function of the brain. The most common causes of injury are being struck in the head, a fall from heights, slipping, and motor vehicle incidents. Mild traumatic brain injury may also be referred to as concussion, minor head injury, mild head injury, closed head injury, and more. These injuries are described as 'mild' as they are usually not life threatening and the patient will generally get better on their own. Individuals who have had a mild traumatic brain injury only rarely need to be hospitalized.

Common Symptoms

The brain is a complex structure, therefore every injury can present differently. At the time of injury, the patient may have loss of consciousness, have amnesia for a short time period, or are simply dazed and confused. Some patients may not discover symptoms for days or weeks after their injury.

Following a mild traumatic brain injury, a person may experience one or more of the following:

- Low-grade headaches
- Difficulty concentrating/forgetfulness
- Sleeplessness/feeling tired
- Irritability
- Neck pain
- Increased sensitivity to light, sound
- Blurred vision
- Depression/anxiety
- Dizziness
- And others.

It is important to note that these symptoms will gradually decrease over days and weeks. However, in rare cases, complications can arise. Contact your doctor or emergency department right away if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- Headaches get worse
- Weakness, numbness, or decreased coordination
- Repeated vomiting
- Cannot be awakened
- Have one pupil larger than the other
- Have convulsions
- Have slurred speech
- Are getting more and more confused, restless or agitated.

Recovery

Speed of recovery varies from patient to patient. Most people recover very quickly, however some will improve at a slower rate. Some of the factors in a slower recovery include the age of the patient, how healthy they were prior to the incident, whether they have other medical conditions, and if they had a concussion before. Also, the severity of the concussion, what part of the brain was injured and the presence of anxiety or depression can make healing more difficult; however, the patient does get better.

It is important to communicate with your doctor about any medications that you are taking including prescriptions (especially blood thinners or Aspirin), over-the-counter or natural medicines, or if you are consuming alcohol or illicit drugs. These may increase your chances of complications and slow recovery.

Some helpful hints in your recovery:

- Get plenty of sleep and rest through the day
- Avoid activities that could lead to another concussion such as a contact sport
- Return to activities gradually, at your own pace. When considering operating heavy machinery, ask your doctor first
- Take only those drugs that your doctor has approved
- Do not drink alcohol
- Talk to your doctor/ employer about returning to work gradually
- Write things down or repeat information if you are having difficulty remembering
- Do one thing at a time to avoid distraction
- Arrange your environment to limit noise and other distractions
- Evaluate your energy limits and do things when you are functioning at your best
- Eat well
- Consider talking to your family and friends about important decisions, and involve them in support for your healing process.

Prognosis

The prognosis is good for patients with mild brain injury. Most individuals eventually return to their normal activities in a few weeks.

Resources

If you have further questions on mild traumatic brain injury, talk to your family doctor or the health professional who is providing your program of care.