

Preventing Traumatic Brain Injury in Older Adults

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION



Most of us worry about staying safe, healthy, and independent as we get older. If you are concerned about living better and longer, you should know the facts about traumatic brain injury. Traumatic brain injury is a serious health problem for older adults. This booklet gives you information about this injury and ways to prevent it.

What is a traumatic brain injury or TBI?

Traumatic brain injury or TBI is caused by a bump or blow to the head. TBIs affect how the brain normally works. TBIs can be mild, moderate, or severe.

- ▶ Falls are the leading cause of TBI.
- ▶ People ages 75 and older have the highest rates of TBI-related hospitalizations and death.

What are the signs and symptoms of TBI?

You can't see a TBI. Signs and symptoms can be hard to detect. Some show up right after the injury. Others can take days or weeks to appear.

TBI can be easy to miss because you might seem fine to others, but you may notice that you act or feel differently.

Learn the signs and symptoms of TBI. Watch for them if you have a fall or accident. If you notice any of these signs or symptoms, see your doctor right away.

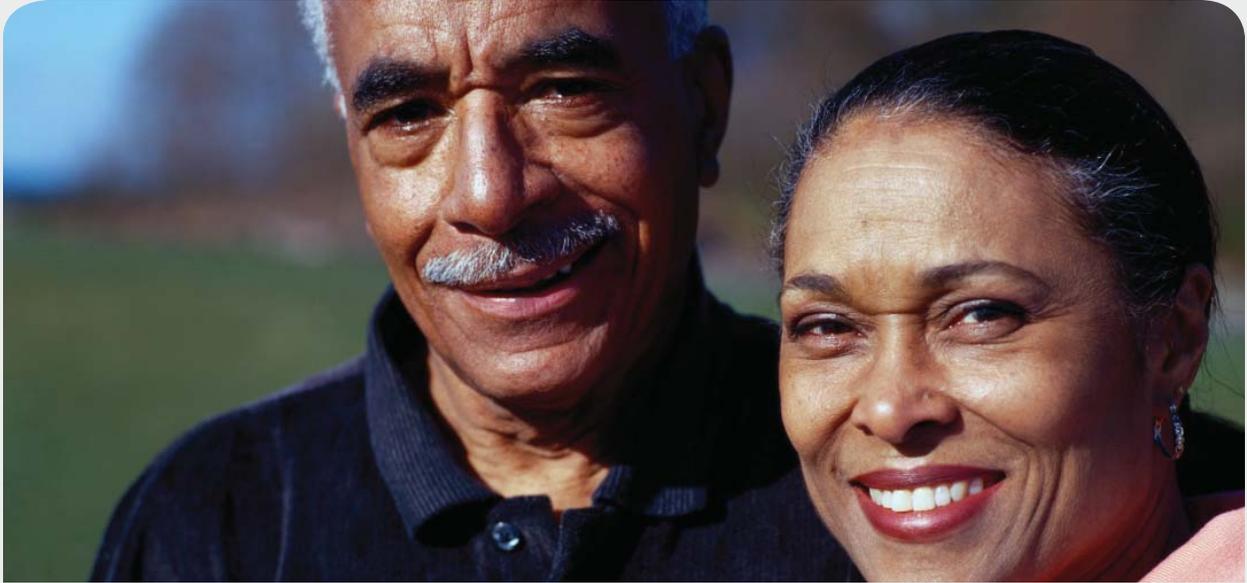
Symptoms of mild TBI include:

- Low-grade headache that won't go away
- Having more trouble than usual remembering things, paying attention or concentrating, organizing daily tasks, or making decisions and solving problems
- Slowness in thinking, speaking, acting, or reading
- Getting lost or easily confused
- Feeling tired all of the time, lack of energy or motivation
- Change in sleep pattern—sleeping much longer than before, having trouble sleeping
- Loss of balance, feeling light-headed or dizzy
- Increased sensitivity to sounds, lights, distractions
- Blurred vision or eyes that tire easily
- Loss of sense of taste or smell
- Ringing in the ears
- Change in sexual drive
- Mood changes like feeling sad, anxious, or listless, or becoming easily irritated or angry for little or no reason

A person with moderate or severe TBI may show the symptoms listed above, but may also have:

- A headache that gets worse or does not go away
- Repeated vomiting or nausea
- Convulsions or seizures
- Inability to wake up from sleep
- Dilation of one or both pupils
- Slurred speech
- Weakness or numbness in the arms or legs
- Loss of coordination
- Increased confusion, restlessness, or agitation

If you are taking blood thinners (e.g. Coumadin) and have a bump or blow to the head, you should be seen immediately by a health care provider, even if you do not have any of the symptoms listed above.



What should you do if you think you have a TBI?

See a doctor right away. Tell the doctor about your injury and your symptoms. Inform the doctor of any medicines you take—prescribed or over-the-counter. Be sure to include any blood thinners or aspirin you take, because they can increase the chance of complications.

It's a good idea to write a list of names and doses of all medicines you take. Keep it handy and update it whenever your medicines change. Take it with you when you see the doctor. That way, you won't have to remember everything in a medical emergency.

Here are some questions to ask your doctor:

- When can I get back to normal activities?
- Is there any activity I should not do, such as exercise?
- When can I return to driving (if you currently drive a car)?
- What drugs should I take (or stop taking)?
- Can I take any other drugs, for example acetaminophen (Tylenol or Panadol)?
- May I drink alcohol? If so, how much?
- What other problems, if any, should I look for related to this injury?
- Will I need any special treatment or therapy?
- When do you want to see me next?



How long will it take to get better?

Recovering from TBI is different for each person. It depends on many things, such as:

- How severe your TBI was
- What part of your brain was injured
- Your age
- How healthy you were before the TBI
- How long it took you to get the right medical treatment

Healing takes time. Older adults in good health tend to get better faster than less healthy people. Those with medical conditions or other problems that can come with aging may take longer to get well. It's important to get plenty of rest. Rest helps your brain to heal.

Can TBI be prevented?

Yes. Remember, falls are the leading cause of TBI in older adults. Here are some things you can do to help prevent falls:



Exercise

Start a regular exercise program, if your doctor agrees. Exercise is one of the best ways to reduce your chance of falling. It helps you become stronger and feel better. Exercises that improve balance and coordination, like Tai Chi, are most helpful. As a safety precaution, you should check with your doctor about which exercises are best for you.



Make your home or surroundings safer

Nearly half of all falls happen at home. Here are some things you can do to make your home or surroundings safer:

- ▶ Remove things from stairs and floors that might cause you to trip, like papers, books, clothes, and shoes.
- ▶ Remove small throw rugs or use double-sided tape to keep the rugs from slipping.
- ▶ Keep items you use often nearby. You should not need to use a step stool to reach them.
- ▶ Have grab bars put in your bathroom. Place them next to the toilet and in the tub or shower.
- ▶ Place non-slip mats in the bathtub and on shower floors.
- ▶ Improve your lighting. We need brighter lighting as we age. Change your lampshades or use frosted light bulbs to help reduce glare.
- ▶ Be sure there are handrails and lights on all staircases.
- ▶ Wear shoes that give you good support. They should have thin, non-slip soles. You should avoid wearing slippers and socks and going shoeless.

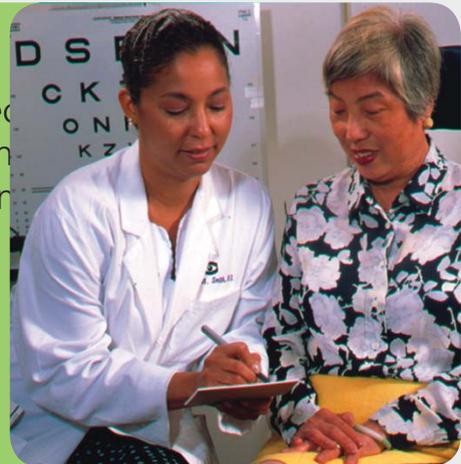
Ask your health care provider to review your medicines

Ask your doctor or local pharmacist to look at all the medicines you take. These might include some that don't need prescriptions, like cold medicines and various vitamins. As we age, the way some medicines work in our bodies can change. Those changes could make us drowsy or light-headed and lead to a fall.



Have your vision checked

The eye doctor should be sure you have the correct eyeglasses and that you have no conditions limiting your vision, like glaucoma or cataracts. Poor vision can increase the chance of falling.



The best way to prevent a fall is to do all of these things.

What should you do if you have a fall?

Try to remain calm. Check yourself for serious injuries, such as bleeding, sprains, strains, dislocations, or fractures. If you are bleeding, apply firm pressure to the area. If you think you are injured and someone is nearby, call for their help. If no one is nearby, try to get up or crawl to a phone to call for help and get medical attention right away. If you cannot get up, try to keep warm by pulling any nearby rugs, coats, or blankets over and under you.

What other resources are available?

There are many people who can help you if you have a TBI. You don't have to do it alone. Show this brochure to family members and your doctor or health care provider. Talk with them about your concerns. The doctor may want you to see someone with special training in treating TBI. Early treatment by specialists may speed recovery. The doctor may refer you to a neurologist, neuropsychologist, neurosurgeon, or specialist in rehabilitation.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control works to prevent injuries and reduce disability, deaths, and costs associated with injuries. CDC has a wide variety of resources and materials about TBI and other types of injuries. Call CDC toll-free at 1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636) or visit

www.cdc.gov/BrainInjuryInSeniors.

Participating Organizations

- Administration on Aging
- American Occupational Therapy Association
- Brain Injury Association of America
- Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services
- Children of Aging Parents
- Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center
- Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Geriatrics and Extended Care
- Easter Seals
- Emergency Nurses Association
- Employee Assistance Professionals Association
- Family Caregiver Alliance/National Center on Caregiving
- Health Resources and Services Administration
- Home Safety Council
- International Parish Nurse Resource Center
- National Adult Day Services Association
- National Alliance for Caregiving
- National Association of Area Agencies on Aging
- National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers
- National Association of State Head Injury Administrators
- National Council on Aging
- National Family Caregivers Association
- National Institute on Aging
- National Safety Council
- State and Territorial Injury Prevention Directors Association
- Visiting Nurse Associations of America
- YMCA of the USA

Help Seniors Live Better, Longer: Prevent Brain Injury

This publication is available in a tri-fold brochure and fact sheet online at
www.cdc.gov/BrainInjuryInSeniors