



QUICK
GUIDE

Brain Injury & Opioids

Opioids are drugs ranging from prescription painkillers to illegal drugs like heroin. While opioids can be effective and safe if taken as prescribed, they can cause severe problems if abused. Over-using substances like opioids puts you at a higher risk for sustaining a brain injury due to trauma or because oxygen is cut off to the brain. Conversely, the symptoms caused by a brain injury increase the likelihood of abusing substances like opioids to temporarily relieve physical pain. Opioid addiction is on the rise, which is why it's important to understand how it affects the brain injury community.

How can opioids cause a brain injury?

Opioids are depressants, meaning the drug slows down your breathing and heart rate. If you take too much, the drug can cause the body to forget to breathe on its own. When that happens, an individual can sustain either a **hypoxic brain injury** (not enough oxygen) or an **anoxic brain injury** (no oxygen at all). Both are types of **acquired brain injuries** and can cause problems like:

- Short-term memory loss
- Problems with concentration
- Vision and/or hearing loss
- Loss of coordination and balance
- Difficulty completing routine tasks (e.g., brushing teeth)
- Confusion, irritability, and depression
- Trouble reading, writing, and communicating

Brain damage can happen within only 3-5 minutes. The longer the brain does not get the right amount of oxygen, the higher the risk for more serious brain damage.

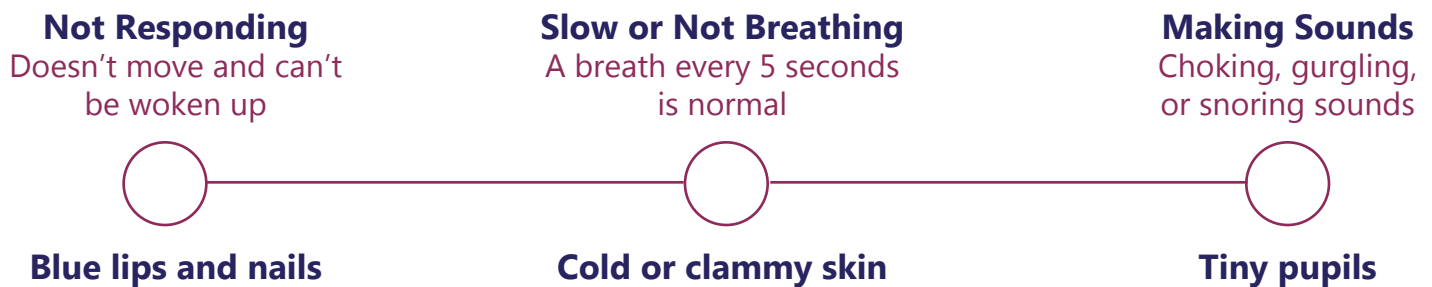
Opioids can also increase the risk of sustaining a traumatic brain injury¹.

Taking opioids (even if prescribed) causes physical side effects that can impair your judgment, motor functions, and memory. Drinking alcohol while taking opioids also makes the side effects worse. When your physical and mental state is impaired by the drug, you are at a higher risk of falling, car accidents, or other injuries that frequently cause traumatic brain injuries.

How can a brain injury increase my chances of abusing opioids?

Common symptoms of a brain injury like headaches, neck pain, and muscle tension are often treated by doctors using medication. If the pain is severe enough, doctors may prescribe stronger pain medications like opioids. Because these types of drugs are very effective at relieving pain, it is possible to over-use and become dependent on them. Taking any prescribed medications exactly as directed and regularly checking in with your doctor about how the medication makes you feel can help you avoid any potential danger.

What are the signs of an opioid overdose?



If you suspect someone is experiencing an overdose, call 911 immediately to seek medical help.

What are the treatment options?

Treatment plans should involve a collaborative team of doctors and rehabilitation specialists to make sure the individual receives treatment for both their brain injury and substance abuse. This may include:

- **Physical Therapy (PT)** – to restore physical strength, mobility, and endurance
- **Occupational Therapy (OT)** – to complete daily tasks, regain independence, and return to normal activity
- **Mental Health Counseling** – to address issues with substance abuse and cope better with emotional changes and other mental health challenges

Although recovery is possible, treatment is often costly and complicated, and treatment for a hypoxic or anoxic brain injury may take months or even years.

The Brain Injury Association of Virginia can help you better understand brain injury, and consult with you about your personal situation. We can then direct you to services in your area you might need. Our services are confidential and free.

Learn more on biav.net

1. Treating Clients with Traumatic Brain Injury, Substance Abuse Treatment Advisory. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. 2010.

© Brain Injury Association of Virginia
All Rights Reserved

1.800.444.6443

biav.net

This project is supported [in part] through state general funds (Contract #16-002A) administered by the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS).