

Five Things You Should Know About Substance Use after Brain Injury

Why do so many individuals with brain injury have problems with substance use?

Substance use problems prior to injury

More than half of those requiring inpatient rehabilitation for brain injury may have had prior problems with alcohol and other drug use. Individuals with these problems before the injury are at risk for even greater problems if they continue to drink or use drugs after the injury.

New substance use problems after injury

A brain injury can lead some people to drink more alcohol or use more drugs than they intend. In comparison to others the same age, people with brain injury tend to drink more alcohol.

After the Injury

Some people initially stop drinking or using drugs after the injury. They may have been told to stop drinking when initially injured. Soon after the person returns home, it may be difficult or impossible to access their drug of choice. The support of family and friends can also help people stay away from alcohol and other drugs. However, as time passes they may believe it is 'safe' to resume their substance of choice. With increased access to the community, substances may be easier to access or they may be trying to cope with other emotional changes brought on by their injury and wish to self-medicate. However, there is no evidence indicating that there is a safe time to resume substance use.

How does alcohol and other drug use affect a person who has had a brain injury?

Persons with brain injury who use alcohol or other drugs show greater problems with brain structure and function.

1. Effect on Recovery.

People who use alcohol or other drugs after they have a brain injury don't recover as well.

2. Problems in Balance, Walking and Talking.

Brain injuries cause problems in balance, walking or talking that get worse when a person uses alcohol or other drugs.

3. Say or Do Things without Thinking First.

People who have had a brain injury often say or do things without thinking first, a problem that is made worse by using alcohol and other drugs.

4. Problems with Thinking, Concentration or Memory.

Brain injuries cause problems with thinking, concentration or memory, and using alcohol or other drugs makes these problems worse.

5. More Likely To Feel Low or Depressed.

People who have had a brain injury are more likely to have times that they feel low or depressed and drinking alcohol and getting high on other drugs makes this worse.

6. Seizures

After a brain injury, drinking alcohol or using other drugs can cause a seizure.

7. More likely to have another brain injury.

People who drink alcohol or use other drugs after a brain injury are more likely to have another brain injury.

Other reasons to avoid alcohol and other drugs

Based on what we know about how alcohol and traumatic brain injury add together to change brain structure and function, researchers at Ohio State University believe that there is no safe amount after brain injury. It is suspected that alcohol and other drugs can interfere with natural healing after a brain injury. The effects of continued substance use can result in further brain damage. It is also expected that substance use can have an impact on how a person is functioning many years after the injury.

When to Seek Help

Based on what we know about how alcohol and traumatic brain injury add together to change brain structure and function, researchers at Ohio State University believe that there is no safe amount after brain injury. It is suspected that alcohol and other drugs can interfere with natural healing after a brain injury. The effects of continued substance use can result in further brain damage. It is also expected that substance use can have an impact on how a person is functioning many years after the injury.

What is appropriate substance use treatment for a person with brain injury?

Impairments caused by brain injury may present unique obstacles to treatment success. There is limited research about which substance abuse treatment methods work best for people who have had brain injuries. Most clinicians feel that techniques found effective for people in general can also be effective for people who have had brain injuries. However, it is important to find a treatment provider who is willing to take into consideration the special needs of the person with brain injury.

Involving family and friends

Substance abuse treatment often includes both the individual and family or friends. The greater a person's cognitive impairments after brain injury, the more important it becomes that people in his or her surroundings are willing to be involved in the treatment process. Similarly, for people who do not see themselves as having a problem, it is more important that family and friends be willing to join professionals to encourage the person to start addressing their substance use.

Stages of Change

How ready a person is to address problems related to their alcohol or other drug use can be described in the following stages:

- 1. Pre-contemplation** (a person sees no problem with his or her alcohol or other drug use when there is one).
- 2. Contemplation** (the person is weighing the pros and cons of changing substance use).
- 3. Preparation** (the person has decided that a change is needed, but does not yet have a specific goal or plan).
- 4. Action** (the person is making changes in order to reduce or eliminate the use of alcohol and other drugs).

Treatment methods for substance use problems

Effective treatment is usually tailored to a person's readiness to address substance use problems. To be effective, the treatment method chosen must be acceptable to the person being treated.

Treatment method options may include:

- Motivational interventions
- Cognitive-behavioral therapy
- Therapeutic communities
- Prescription medications
- Self-help groups

Accommodating symptoms of brain injury in treatment

It is important that the substance use counselor understand the unique challenges that persons with brain injury face in substance use treatment. For ideas for how to accommodate treatment for a person with brain injury, professionals can contact the Brain Injury Association of Virginia (www.biav.net) or the Ohio Valley Center for BI Prevention & Rehabilitation (www.ohiovalley.org)

Living in recovery

Learning about the effects of alcohol and other drugs after brain injury can help people to make choices that will help them to recover more fully. Family and friends can help support an alcohol and drug-free lifestyle. People can also obtain support through treatment. We believe that people can continue to show improvements for several years after a brain injury, as long as they are living a healthy lifestyle, which includes avoiding alcohol and other drugs.

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**BRAIN INJURY
ASSOCIATION**
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