



Alcohol after Traumatic Brain Injury

Choose a Path to a Healthier Lifestyle

Coping with a disability isn't easy. It can lead people to misuse alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, and this can seriously hurt them. For some people with disabilities, any use of alcohol or other drugs can be very dangerous. This happens because of the way the person's body and mind react to the medicines they use. For example, some people who have nervous system disabilities can have seizures if they drink alcohol or other drugs. If your family member has a brain injury you can help him or her make healthier choices. Here's some information that can help you.

Do you see your family member in any of these stories?

- Sally is exhausted and depressed after a full day of rehabilitation. She takes the anti-seizure medicine her doctor prescribed – and then decides to have wine with dinner...
- This is John's first visit home since his accident. His drinking buddies come over to see him and take him out...
- Marcel has had many medical problems since his injury. He sees several different doctors and they don't know how much he's still drinking. They've prescribed various medications which Marcel takes "as needed"...
- Tanya has had a hard day and is feeling down. So many things that used to be easy before her disability are now difficult. She turns on the T.V. and reaches for the first beer of the night...
- Robert has been feeling lonely and upset since his accident, and he rarely leaves the house. To help him feel better, his mother buys him beer. Before the accident, she didn't allow him to have alcohol in the house...

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If these stories sound familiar, here's some information you need to know:

About the Issue

- Alcohol is connected with over half of all traumatic brain injuries. If someone had trouble with alcohol or other drug use before they were injured, there's a good chance the problem will continue afterwards, too.
- Some people with traumatic brain injury lose their normal inhibitions due to the injury. Drinking alcohol may affect their self-control and they may have problems relating to other people.
- After a traumatic brain injury, many people experience severe depression. Since alcohol and many other drugs act as depressants, they can greatly intensify these negative emotions.
- People with traumatic brain injury often take medication to prevent seizures. Alcohol and other drugs interfere with those medications – increasing the chance that the person with a TBI will have a seizure.
- A person with a traumatic brain injury may find that it's harder to make plans, remember facts, or concentrate on a subject. He or she may have problems walking, moving, or speaking easily. Using alcohol and other drugs can lead to even greater problems in all these activities.

What You and Your Family Can Do

- Learn about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs including the special risks associated with disability. You can read more, attend training sessions, talk to counselors or health educators, or attend disability-specific support groups.
- Work with your family member's rehabilitation specialist to :
 - Encourage your family member to take responsibility for his or her own behavior
 - Provide your family member consistent feedback
 - Help your family member deal with the feelings that lead him or her to use alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs
- Talk with your family member about what he or she will do when friends offer alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs to him or her.
- Be a role model – cope with stress and other problems in a positive way. Demonstrate ways to have fun without drinking, smoking, or taking other drugs.
- Ask one doctor to take responsibility for all medications to prevent your family member from misusing or abusing prescription medications. You may also need to help your family member take medications on schedule, to be sure they are used as the doctor intends.

Alcohol after Brain Injury

- Remove alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs from the house. Also keep an eye on over-the-counter drugs and substances that could be inhaled.
- Do not encourage use. Sometimes family members and friends may encourage people with disabilities to use alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs, believing it helps the person feel better. Encouraging the use of these substances (by buying or offering them to your family member) is called “enabling” because it helps them begin or continue substance abuse. While you should be flexible and understanding about disability-related limits, you should discourage unhealthy practices, such as the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.
- Don’t overlook this problem. Sometimes family members simply don’t notice the harmful effects of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs because they are focusing so much on the disability. In fact, the problems created by these substances may be similar to problems created by the disability, so it is difficult to sort them out. Talk to a rehabilitation specialist about the differences.
- Express your concerns in a caring but firm way. If you’re worried about possible substance abuse by a family member who has a disability, set boundaries. Define clear consequences in advance – consequences that are suitable for this particular situation, and that you’re really willing to carry out if needed.
- Ask for help. If you identify a problem, explore some of the difficult actions that may be needed. Help your family member take charge of his or her life. You can talk with rehabilitation specialists and health educators, or attend support groups like Al-Anon (alcohol abuse) and Nar-Anon (drug abuse).

“Rehabilitation success requires commitment, energy, and determination... Rehabilitation requires sobriety.”

*-James S. Jeffers, Director
Maryland Division of
Rehabilitation Services*

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