
Acquired brain injuries and spinal cord injuries

Summary

- Long-term effects of an acquired brain injury and spinal cord injury are difficult to predict. They will be different for each person.
 - Talk to your health professional to get advice and directions on where to find ongoing support in the community.
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If you experience an acquired brain injury (ABI) or spinal cord injury, it may take quite a while for you and your family to adjust to a new way of life. The seriousness of your accident or illness is likely to determine how different your life will be.

Acquired brain injury (ABI) can affect people in different ways and you may experience increased fatigue (mental and physical), and or changes in physical and cognitive functions, behaviour, personality and sensory functions. A severe spinal cord injury can result in paraplegia or quadriplegia.

You may need to get used to being in a wheelchair or not having control of some of your motor functions. If you are recovering from a stroke, you may need to work with a physiotherapist and speech therapist to 'relearn' skills you lost through injury. Generally, the more severe the illness or injury, the more significant the symptoms and loss of function will be.

Getting help and support

Talk to your health professional or an organisation that supports people who have had a stroke, brain or spinal injury to get advice and directions on where to find ongoing support in the community. They will also be able to explain what treatments, therapies and lifestyle changes may be required.

A wide range of specialist support services are available across Victoria and Australia:

- **BrainLink** – a Victorian based service for people affected by acquired disorders of the brain. Call **1800 677 579** for advice and support.
- **Stroke Foundation** – call StrokeLine on **1800 787 653** for information and advice on stroke prevention, treatment and recovery.
- **SpinalHub** – a website focusing on community integration for Victorians with a spinal cord injury.
- **Spinal Cord Injuries Australia** – offers support and exercise rehabilitation services to people with physical disabilities.

Managing the changes

The consequences of having an ABI or spinal cord injury can be far reaching. Coping with any loss of functioning and going through lengthy rehabilitation can be difficult. It is normal to feel distressed and worried about what the future holds. Your family, friends and partners may also experience difficulties as they deal with emotional and practical challenges, interruptions to family life and a change of roles.

ABIs and spinal cord injuries may have a significant effect on your relationships, social networks, recreation and work activities. It may mean you and your immediate family will have to adapt to a new way of life and new kinds of relationships. However, caring for someone who has had a traumatic brain or spinal cord injury can bond a family closer together and help them focus on what is important.

It will help if family members:

- have accurate and reliable information about the effects of the injury
 - appreciate the difficulties that they might encounter
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- understand that recovery can be a slow and on-going process. For carers to cope with the situation, it helps to:
- stay with the present, rather than thinking about how bleak the future may seem
- highlight strengths and daily achievements, rather than the weaknesses
- make time to care for themselves
- ask for help when they need it.

Diagnosis of ABI or spinal cord injury

A range of tests, including x-rays, MRI and CT brain scans, can help pinpoint the exact areas of damage to the brain or spinal cord. In some cases, surgery may be needed. Recovery depends on the extent and location of the brain or spinal cord damage, the age and general health of the person, the speed of first aid received and the quality of treatment.

Except in the case of extremely serious injuries, people with ABIs and spinal cord injuries can still do most things that the rest of the community can. They can:

- work
- study
- enjoy recreation
- socialise
- have relationships
- have a family of their own.

Sometimes though, they must do these things in a slightly different way to the majority of the community.

Rehabilitation for an acquired brain injury and spinal cord injury

The long-term effects of an acquired brain injury and spinal cord injury are difficult to predict. They will be different for each person and can range from mild to profound depending on the cause and severity of the condition.

Learn more about the different causes, symptoms and treatments:

Spinal cord injury – **paraplegia** and **quadriplegia** are conditions that result from damage to the spinal cord from an accident or other trauma. Health problems for people with spinal cord injuries may include urinary tract infections, kidney stones and pressure sores.

Stroke – by recognising the warning signs and taking action, you may be able to prevent a stroke or reduce its severity. It is important to be able to recognise the warning signs of stroke and get medical help as quickly as possible.

Brain tumour – symptoms depend on which part of the brain the tumour affects. Generally, a growing tumour and swelling brain tissue presses on the brain causing symptoms.

Hydrocephalus – the abnormal enlargement of the brain cavities (ventricles) is caused by a build-up of cerebrospinal fluid (CSF). Untreated, hydrocephalus can result in brain damage or death.

Multiple sclerosis – may lead to neuropsychological symptoms including memory loss, depression and cognitive (thought-related) difficulties.

Subdural haematomas – blood clots formed underneath one of the protective layers of the brain, usually occurring after a blow to the head. Symptoms can include severe headache, confusion, slurred speech and visual disturbances.

Aneurysm – an abnormal bulge in the wall of a blood vessel, such as an artery. Aneurysms most commonly develop along the aorta (the body's main blood vessel) and in blood vessels of the brain. If an aneurysm ruptures, death can occur in minutes.

Alcohol related brain impairment – problems caused by alcohol misuse are together called alcohol related brain impairment (ARBI). A person with ARBI might experience problems with memory, thinking-related abilities and physical coordination.

Parkinson's disease – a progressive, degenerative neurological condition that affects a person's control of their body movements. It is not contagious and not fatal. Read more about Parkinson's disease.

Coma – occurs when there is a serious problem with the brain's arousal system, or with its communications between other brain areas and the brain's activity becomes impaired.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Neurologist
- **BrainLink**, call **1800 677 579**
- **Brain Disorders Programme Victoria**, ABI Behaviour Consultancy Service, call **(03) 9490 7366**
- **Spinal Hub**, call **(03) 9418 0432**
- **National Stroke Foundation StrokeLine**, call **1800 787 653**

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