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MILD BRAIN INJURY

adapted from: The Unseen Injury, Minor Head Trauma, An Introduction for Patients and Families

Brain Injury Association, Inc.

(revised in 1999 by Brain Injury Association of Minnesota)

MILD BRAIN INJURY

Mild brain injury causes temporary changes in the way a person thinks, feels and acts. Brain injuries are considered mild if the injury is not serious enough to require formal rehabilitation. If the person with brain injury is seen in the hospital he/she is often sent home after an initial check up. Some people stay in the hospital for an observation period lasting a few hours to overnight. Other terms used for mild brain injury: minor or moderate brain injury, concussion, post concussive syndrome, mild traumatic brain injury.

IS THE HEAD ALWAYS STRUCK IN A MILD BRAIN INJURY?

No. Many people assume minor brain injury results only from hitting the head. However, mild brain injury is caused in many ways: fall, blow to the head, vehicle crash, a violent jarring motion - such as a whiplash injury, anoxia (lack of oxygen to the brain), sports and recreation injury, stroke, aneurysms, illness, infections to the brain, ingestion of toxic substances, tumor, excessive alcohol or drug abuse, acts of violence.

INJURY TO THE BRAIN

Injury to the brain occurs when the soft, movable brain twists and collides with the rough interior surface of the skull. Nerve fibers in the brain may be stretched and torn. Bruising may occur on the surface of the brain. In some more serious injuries, bleeding and swelling may occur.

CONSCIOUSNESS

Unconsciousness occurs if the brainstem is injured. Sometimes the person loses consciousness, but not always. Brief loss of consciousness is more common. Mild brain injury can occur even without loss of consciousness.

“THE UNSEEN INJURY”

Many people living with mild brain injury describe themselves as having an “unseen injury.” Even though physical recovery may be complete and the person looks fine, non physical problems in the areas of thinking, behavior and emotions may remain.

TYPICAL COURSE OF RECOVERY AFTER MILD BRAIN INJURY

Although recovery differs between individuals, most people who receive a mild brain injury will be fine. Some people will experience headaches, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, confusion, disorientation, fatigue and slowness immediately after the injury. Memory of the events close to the time of injury may be lost. Persons may have problems with learning and memory, attention and concentration, a slower thinking process, and physical and mental fatigue.

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Often symptoms last from a few days up to many months. Usually they gradually disappear. Injury to many brain cells or repeated mild injuries may cause permanent changes in the way the person thinks, feels and acts. Often these changes are not recognized until a person encounters the demands of work, school or home. Return slowly and gradually to a typical routine.

WHEN CHANGES LAST

It will be noticeable that *something is off*, that things *aren't the same*. For example:

- Memory changes are common. A person may be forgetful of names, where he/she put things, he/she may miss appointments and may forget typical work and home tasks. It may be hard to learn new information or new routines.
- Attention may be shorter. He/she may be easily distracted, or lose his/her place when shifting back and forth between two things. Some people find it hard to concentrate and may become mentally fatigued when reading or doing things that require long periods of concentration. It may be hard for the person to find the right words to express exactly what he/she is trying to say.
- Thinking and responding may be slower. It may take more effort to do the things that were once automatic.
- Insights and spontaneous ideas may not come as easily as they did before the injury.
- Emotionally, a person may be more irritable and have broad mood swings. Conflict with family or co-workers may arise more often. Feelings of depression may be experienced more regularly. Laughing or crying may happen unexpectedly. Strong emotions may come and go very quickly. When asked to describe how they felt soon after their injury, some people living with brain injury said, "I wondered if I was going crazy."
- Organization may be more difficult. Making plans, setting and carrying out tasks may seem overwhelming.
- Judgment issues can also be a concern. Some people say or do things without realizing what the consequences will be.
- Social and personality changes are also common. A person may miss the subtle cues that others give. He/she may react to what someone else is doing in a negative way. Family and friends may comment, "You're not the same since your injury."

People experience a variety of changes after mild brain injury. If a change being experienced is not mentioned above, it may still be a result of the injury. Getting help from a medical doctor, therapist or counselor may be a great benefit in figuring out how to overcome or adapt to the changes that have occurred.

SEEKING HELP

Contact a trusted medical professional (regardless of his/her discipline). Explain the changes that have occurred since the injury. Ask for a referral to have a **neuropsychological evaluation**. This is an evaluation that helps to identify how a brain injury has changed a person's abilities. A neuropsychologist who specializes in mild brain injury can help the individual and those around him/her understand the effects of the brain injury. They also suggest compensation strategies to help.

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HIDDEN ISSUES TO CONSIDER

It is important to know that brain cell damage may be widespread and microscopic. Proof of injury does not always appear on x-rays, CAT scans, or on neurological exams. It is possible to have mild brain injury even if test results appear “normal.”

Intelligence usually measures the same as before the injury. Intelligence alone is not an indication of whether or not a person has lasting changes. Problems may be real and caused by mild brain injury. Do not stop seeking help if a professional says that symptoms are being imagined.

CONCLUSION

Contact the Brain Injury Association of Minnesota. Even if you have called before, we can provide you with information about your current questions, give you more information about mild brain injury, tell you about local support groups and refer you to local professionals who are active in treating persons with mild brain injury.

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