

Causes and Effects of Traumatic Brain Injury

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Memories of the 2014 Winter Olympics are already starting to fade but what about the impact of those spectacular falls? The world was watching as our greatest winter athletes competed in extreme, high risk sports. Their performances were inspiring and often beautiful but there were also many times when their Olympic dreams were cut short by an accident. The images of them tumbling down hillsides at high speed were sometimes difficult to watch.

Nowadays, we are more aware than ever of the link between head injuries at any age and cognitive changes later in life. Fortunately those Olympic athletes benefit from the advice and care of highly skilled medical professionals. They also wear high quality protective equipment appropriate for their sport. This is yet another way in which they serve as a role model. Having an active lifestyle is important, but it is just as important to protect your brain from injury.

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) occurs when a person experiences an impact to the head which disrupts normal brain function. The effects of TBI on brain health can be both immediate and long-term. Immediate effects include changes that result as a direct cause of the injury, such as unconsciousness, confusion, difficulty speaking, and problems with coordination, vision or hearing. These effects may be temporary or permanent. But even if a person recovers from a brain injury and returns to normal function, there is evidence that certain types of TBI can increase the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia years later. In this way, even a mild TBI at any age can have serious and long-term effects on cognition.

The good news is that you can easily take action to avoid a head injury. The most common causes of TBI are falls, vehicle accidents, and sports injuries. Here are some things you can do to prevent these types of injuries:

Protect yourself against concussions by wearing an approved helmet when engaging in sports activities. Helmets are not just for children since you can experience a sports-related head injury at any age. And by choosing to wear the appropriate protective equipment you serve as a role model for our children and youth.

Drive safely and always wear your seat belt to reduce injuries in an accident. We cannot always control what happens on the roads, but by wearing your seat belt you may at least minimize the impact if an accident occurs.

Falls are the leading cause of head injury, particularly among older adults. Take steps to prevent falls by:

- Maintaining your strength, balance and flexibility by keeping physically active

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- De-cluttering your home and removing tripping hazards
- Reviewing your medications with your doctor or pharmacist as some medications can affect balance
- Improving light and visibility inside and outside your home (e.g., stairways, hallways, entrances)
- Installing hand rails and grab bars
- Using assistive devices (e.g., cane or walker) as advised by your health care providers

If you have experienced a blow to your head, you should seek medical advice even if your symptoms seem mild. You may have experienced a brain injury even if you don't have serious symptoms. It is important to get checked and avoid further problems.

If you would like more information about other things you can do to improve your brain health, visit us at: <http://www.alzheimer.ca/en/pklnh/About-dementia/About-the-brain/Brain-health>

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