

Consequences of Acquired Brain Injury (ABI)

What is an Acquired Brain Injury?

An Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) is any sudden damage to the brain received during a person's lifetime and not as a result of birth trauma. It may result from trauma to the head through a road accident, assault or other causes such as a stroke, brain haemorrhage, infection, lack of oxygen or tumours in the brain.

The consequences of a brain injury can vary widely depending on the location and the amount of damage to the brain tissue. Listed below are a number of possible consequences, but not everyone will experience all of these.

Types of Consequences

Because the brain is such a complex organ and there are so many possible difficulties that can arise, we have divided them into the following categories:

- Physical and Sensory difficulties
- Difficulties with thinking
- Emotional and Behavioural difficulties
- Social and Family consequences

Physical and Sensory Difficulties

Fatigue

Many people experience extreme tiredness following brain injury. Some people with brain injury are only able to function well for short periods during the day and need frequent rest.

Headaches/Pain

These may be frequent or come and go, and can vary in severity.

Right or Left Side Weakness

The right side of the brain controls the left side of the body and the left side of the brain controls the right side of the body. Depending on which part of the brain is injured there may be a physical weakness mainly on one side of the body. This may lead to difficulty with movement.

Balance and Coordination

Difficulties with balance can result in a reduced ability to walk unaided. There may also be difficulties with co-ordinating movements, particularly detailed movements.

Visual or other sensory difficulties

Visual difficulties can include problems with reading and seeing far away, judging distance, reading maps, doing puzzles and recognising things. Sometimes the person's "visual field" is limited and people lose the ability to perceive things in the part of the visual field that's injured. Other senses may be affected such as the capacity to smell or taste and there may be difficulties with hearing such as noise sensitivity, ringing or buzzing noises.

Seizures

Seizures and epilepsy are relatively common following brain injury. See our Factsheet "Seizures following Acquired Brain Injury" for more information.

Incontinence

Brain Injury can affect a person's ability to control bladder and bowel functions.

Disturbed Sleep

A large proportion of people with brain injury experience sleep difficulties. Disturbed sleep at night can also lead to excessive drowsiness during the day.

Swallowing and Speech Difficulties

Difficulties controlling the muscles responsible for speech and swallowing can result in slurred speech or difficulties with chewing and swallowing. There may also be difficulties with being able to interpret what's being said and in thinking of what you want to say.

Thinking and Mental Processing

Memory Difficulties

Difficulties with memory, particularly short term memory, are very common following a brain injury. See our Factsheet "Memory following an Acquired Brain Injury" for more information.

Attention and Concentration

See our Factsheet "Attention and Concentration after an Acquired Brain Injury" for more information.

Information Overload

Many people have difficulty receiving or processing large amounts of information following a brain injury and may need extra time to respond, or may need information presented in smaller amounts.

Planning, Reasoning and Decision Making

The abilities to plan, make decisions or solve a problem by reasoning are known as executive functions. These abilities may be reduced where injury to the frontal lobes of the brain has occurred.

Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

Irritability/Anger

Sometimes people with a brain injury can respond to stress with higher levels of anger or irritation than you would see normally. A brain injury can lower your ability to tolerate stress and frustration. This is usually associated with injury to the frontal lobe of the brain.

Reduced Awareness (Lack of Insight)

Some injuries reduce a person's capacity to be aware of their own actions and difficulties. This can typically accompany injury to the frontal lobes of the brain which govern our ability to be self-aware.

Depression/Anxiety/Loss of Confidence

Coming to terms with the changes resulting from a brain injury can result in a loss of confidence and lowered self esteem and sometimes depression. This can sometimes be a stage which precedes a person developing greater self-awareness. If this begins to worry you, contact your GP for referral to appropriate professionals.

Self-centredness

Some people with a brain injury find it more difficult to empathise with others feelings which can result in behaviour which appears self-centred.

Low motivation/Apathy

People who have sustained injuries to the frontal lobes of the brain may show a lack of motivation or lack of interest in engaging in pursuits or forward planning.

Inability to control emotions (Lability)

Sometimes an injury can result in a person losing the ability to control how emotions are expressed. This can result in them moving rapidly between emotional states, often in ways that might appear inappropriate. For example, they may laugh in a situation where it is not appropriate to do so.

Impulsivity and inappropriate behaviour

The lack of ability to control actions or speech can lead to behaviour which appears inappropriate such as speaking out, touching people inappropriately, or not considering the consequences of an action.

Inflexibility

A lack of ability to show flexibility in responses can lead to behaviour which appears difficult, such as unreasonable stubbornness.

Social and Family Consequences

Brain injury can result in many consequences which make it difficult for the person to socialise and undertake family roles in the same way as prior to the injury. Many of the consequences described above can result in:

- Reduced independence within the family and wider community
- Difficulties getting and maintaining employment
- Social isolation and a reduction of one's circle of friends or acquaintances
- Relationship difficulties
- Financial difficulties

For more information on this, please see our Carer and Family Guide.

Thanks to clients of Headway's service in Limerick in the preparation of this factsheet.