

SEVERE HEAD INJURY

Severe head injuries require immediate medical attention because there's a risk of serious brain damage.

This topic focuses on severe head injury. Read about minor head injuries.

Symptoms of a severe head injury can include:

- **unconsciousness** where a person has collapsed and is unresponsive, even for a brief period of time
- **concussion** a sudden but short-lived loss of mental function that occurs after a blow or other injury to the head; a person with concussion may have a glazed look or appear confused, but won't necessarily be unconscious
- **fits or seizures**
- **difficulty speaking or staying awake**
- **problems with the senses** such as hearing loss or double vision
- **repeated episodes of vomiting**
- **blood or clear fluid coming from the ears or nose**
- **memory loss (amnesia)**
- **sudden swelling or bruising around both eyes or behind the ear**
- **difficulty with walking or co-ordination**

Dial 999 immediately to request an ambulance if you're with someone who experiences any of these symptoms after sustaining a head injury. Alternatively, take them immediately to your nearest accident and emergency (A&E) department.

You should also go to hospital if someone has injured their head and:

- the injury was caused by a forceful blow to the head at speed, such as being hit by a car or falling one metre or more
- the person has had previous brain surgery
- the person has had previous problems with uncontrollable bleeding or a blood clotting disorder, or is taking medication that may cause bleeding problems, such as warfarin
- the person has been drinking alcohol or has taken drugs
- the injury wasn't accidental for example, you deliberately hurt yourself or someone else hurt you on purpose

DIAGNOSING A SEVERE HEAD INJURY

If you've had a severe head injury and there's a chance you may have a brain injury, you'll have a computerised tomography (CT) scan to assess the seriousness of the injury.

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Registered Charity Number: 1164620



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The Glasgow Coma Scale (GCS) is often used to assess head injuries. This is a scale from 3 to 15 that identifies how serious your head injury is, based on your symptoms and whether the brain has been damaged (with 3 being most severe and 15 the least severe).

A GCS score of 13 or above would indicate a minor head injury. A score of 9 to 12 would be a moderate head injury. If a person has a severe head injury, they'll have a score of 8 or less.

Some people with significant head injuries have a high GCS score initially, but their score decreases when they're reassessed at a later stage.

If you have a severe head injury, you'll be closely monitored and frequently reassessed to check your condition.

TREATING A SEVERE HEAD INJURY

Severe head injuries always require hospital treatment. This may involve:

- observing the condition for any changes
- running tests to check for further damage
- treating any other injuries
- breathing support (ventilation) or brain surgery

Most people are able to go home within 48 hours. However, a small number of those admitted to hospital require skull or brain surgery.

When you're discharged from hospital, your doctor will advise you on the best way to help your recovery when you return home.

COMPLICATIONS

A severe head injury can result in pressure being placed on the brain because of bleeding, blood clots or a build-up of fluid. This can sometimes lead to brain damage, which can be temporary or permanent.

A severe head injury can also cause other potentially serious complications, including:

- an infection after a skull fracture
- impaired consciousness
- brain injury

Around 1 in every 2,000 people who attend an A&E department with a head injury dies as a result of their injury.

PREVENTING HEAD INJURIES

It can be difficult to predict or avoid a head injury, but there are some things you can do to reduce the risk of serious injury. These include:

- ensuring your home (or those of elderly relatives) are free of trip hazards that could cause a fall, such

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as loose carpets or unnecessary items on the floor

- “childproofing” your home for example, by ensuring young children can't reach windows or balconies
- using the right safety equipment for work, sport and DIY

Wearing a safety helmet during certain activities, such as skiing or cycling, may also help to prevent a serious head injury.

Read more about cycle safety, preventing falls and preventing accidents to children in the home.

RECOVERING FROM A SEVERE HEAD INJURY

When you're discharged from hospital, you'll be given information and advice to help your recovery at home.

Your recovery programme will depend on the exact nature of your injury, your individual needs and general health.

ADVICE FOR ADULTS

If you're recovering from a severe head injury you may be advised to:

- have someone stay with you for the first 24 hours and keep a phone to hand, in case any problems arise and you need medical help
- get plenty of rest and avoid stressful situations
- avoid drinking alcohol or taking illegal drugs
- avoid taking sleeping pills, sedatives or tranquillisers (unless prescribed by your doctor)
- take paracetamol if you have a headache, but avoid non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen and aspirin (unless prescribed by a doctor)
- avoid playing contact sports, such as football or rugby, for at least three weeks, and speak to your doctor before starting to play these sports again
- not return to work or school until you've completely recovered and feel well enough to do so
- not drive a car or motorbike, ride a bicycle or operate machinery until you've completely recovered and it's safe and legal to do so

WHEN TO SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION

YOU SHOULD SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL ATTENTION IF YOU DEVELOP ANY FURTHER SYMPTOMS OF A SEVERE HEAD INJURY WHILE RECOVERING AT HOME.

ADVICE FOR CHILDREN

If your child is recovering from a severe head injury, you may be advised to:

- give them paracetamol if they have a headache, but avoid NSAIDs, such as ibuprofen and aspirin (aspirin should never be given to children under the age of 16)

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- only give them light meals for the first day or two
- avoid getting them too excited
- avoid having too many visitors when they return home
- not let them play contact sports until a doctor says it's safe to do so
- not let them play roughly for a few days

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL ATTENTION IF YOUR CHILD DEVELOPS ANY FURTHER SYMPTOMS OF A SEVERE HEAD INJURY WHILE RECOVERING AT HOME.

FOLLOW-UP APPOINTMENTS AND REHABILITATION

You may be advised to see your GP the week after you're discharged from hospital, so they can check how you're coping.

You may also have a number of follow-up appointments at a head injury clinic. These will usually be with a specialist, such as a neurologist (an expert in the brain and nervous system).

Depending on how your head injury has affected you, you may need various types of treatment to help with your recovery, such as:

- **physiotherapy:** to help with physical problems such as weakness, stiffness or poor co-ordination
- **occupational therapy:** to help you make changes in your home or workplace if you're struggling with everyday tasks
- **speech therapy**
- **psychological therapy:** such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to help you cope better if your injury has affected your mental wellbeing

DRIVING AFTER A HEAD INJURY

A serious head injury may affect your ability to drive. You're legally required to inform the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) and your insurance company.

You won't be able to drive until you receive DVLA approval and your doctor has confirmed you've made a full recovery.

See the GOV.UK website for more information about driving with a health condition.

You can also read the Rica guide to motoring after a brain injury.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

BRAIN AND SPINE FOUNDATION

3.36 Canterbury Court, Kennington Park, 1-3 Brixton Road, London, SW9 6DE

Tel : 0808 808 1000

www.brainandspine.org.uk

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