

Substance Use

Alcohol and/or drug abuse is fairly common among individuals with acquired brain injury. Persons who have sustained an acquired brain injury **must not use any drugs or alcohol**, for the following reasons:

- **Medication Interactions:** Individuals with brain injury often take prescribed medications that may cause a dangerous reaction when combined with alcohol and other drugs. This could include seizures or even death.
- **Risk for Additional Injury:** The use of alcohol and drugs may further impair functioning and cause the person with a brain injury to fall or somehow injure themselves again when intoxicated.
- **A Decrease in the Level of Functioning and Independence:** The use of alcohol and drugs will limit or decrease independence due to increased feelings of isolation, less coordination for self-care and impaired thinking, which may already be compromised.
- **Reduced Control of Emotional Responses:** Using alcohol or drugs will make depression and anxiety worse. It can make a person more aggressive and more likely to strike out or use a weapon.
- **Increase in Family Stress and Increase in Caretaker's Responsibilities:** An individual's disability affects the entire family, causing increased stress. When the brain injured family member uses alcohol and/or drugs, it exacerbates the loss of functioning and can increase the stress level even more among other family members, increasing the level of help needed for basic care.
- **Decrease in Chances of Returning to Work, School or Vocational Training:** Alcohol and drug abuse hinders one's ability to regain independence. The importance of rejoining the community, regaining a place in the world and becoming a contributing, more capable individual is tremendously helpful in terms of the person's self-esteem and self-worth.

Prevention

With the identification of these areas of concern, the problems that can develop when an individual with a brain injury abuses alcohol and drugs become clear. It is important to be aware of approaches for prevention before serious problems develop. The areas of prevention are:

Information and Education

The more you understand about potential problems, the more able you are to identify a possible problem or recognize if you are at increased risk for a substance abuse problem.

Development of Skills for Coping with Disability

The more independence and coping skills one has, the less need there is for self-medicating with alcohol and drugs. Coping skills include development of a support system and identifying specific

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people in your support network who can help with adjustment issues like depression, grief, anxiety and isolation.

Think of alternative behaviors and activities that can take the place of drinking or doing drugs such as recreational activities (e.g., join the local YMCA) or participation in social clubs or groups with a focus on independence and increased self-esteem.

Talk to your physician if you think the brain injured family member is depressed, anxious or experiencing other adjustment problems. As an option, there are many safe and effective medications to help with these common problems.

Resources

If alcohol and drugs do become a problem, find help immediately. The following resources can aid in recovery from alcohol and drug abuse:

- **Resource Center on Substance Abuse and Prevention** 1331 F Street, NW Suite 800 Washington, D.C. Phone: (202) 783-2900; TDD: (202) 737-0645. They provide reference materials and referrals to treatment programs and professionals in your area.
- Contact your physician for a referral to a helping professional with a specialty in the treatment of substance abuse.
- Find Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings in your area. These are free support groups for people with substance abuse problems.

You can read more information about substance use after brain injury provided by Traumatic Brain Injury Model Systems at: <http://www.msctc.org/tbi/factsheets/Alcohol-Use-After-Traumatic-Brain-Injury>

For information on Alcoholics Anonymous please visit: <http://www.aa.org/>

For information on Narcotics Anonymous please visit: <https://www.na.org/>