

Help Seniors Live Better, Longer: Prevent Brain Injury

Anyone who cares for or just cares about an older adult—a parent, grandparent, other family member, or even a close friend—will say they are concerned about keeping their loved one healthy and independent. But few will say they are worried about a traumatic brain injury (TBI) robbing their loved one of his or her independence. That’s because many people simply are unaware that TBI is a serious health concern for older adults.



TBI is caused by a bump, blow, or jolt to the head that affects how the brain normally works. Dr. Ileana Arias, director of the National Center

for Injury Prevention and Control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), says that “falls are the leading cause of TBI.”

“Adults ages 75 and older have the highest rates of TBI-related hospitalizations and death, and they tend to recover more slowly or die more often from these injuries than do younger people,” says Dr. Arias.

Unfortunately, TBI is not visible and the signs and symptoms can be subtle. They might appear right after the injury occurs, or they might not be noticed or appear until days or even weeks later. TBIs also are easily missed because the person often appears to be fine, but may act differently than usual.

In addition, some TBI signs and symptoms mimic signs of aging, such as slowness in thinking, speaking, reacting, or becoming lost and easily confused. Therefore, it is important for those who care for and about older adults to look for signs and symptoms of TBI in those who have fallen or among those with a fall-related injury, such as a hip fracture.

Fall prevention is the best way to combat TBI among older adults. Dr. Arias recommends the following to help prevent loved ones from falling.

- Encourage your loved one to exercise, if their doctor agrees. Exercise improves balance and coordination, so it’s one of the best ways to reduce an older adult’s chance of falling.
- Make their home and surroundings safer by making easy modifications, such as removing rugs, placing frequently used items within easy reach, and installing grab bars next to the toilet and in the shower or tub.
- Ask their health care provider to review all medicines—both prescription and over-the-counter. The way some medicines work in the body can change as people age.
- Take your loved one to have their vision checked. Poor vision can increase their chance of falling.

“My stepfather's TBI has really been hard on our family, particularly for my mother. He fell and hit his head on the floor, which caused a serious TBI. His recovery was very slow. For about two years he lacked energy and seemed depressed. We found out later that a certain medicine he was taking might have contributed to his fall. I wish we had known about TBI then. Now I know there are some easy things we can do—like asking his doctor to review his medications regularly that might keep him from falling and having another TBI.”

Sandy H.

To learn more about the signs and symptoms of TBI and how to prevent, recognize, and respond to TBI in older adults, call CDC at 1-800-CDC-INFO or visit: www.cdc.gov/BrainInjuryInSeniors.