

Alcohol and Drug Use after a Brain Injury

You may experience the following if you consume alcohol or drugs after a brain injury:

Slowing recovery

Using alcohol and drugs after a brain injury may result in loss of progress in injury recovery. Because brain cells have been lost, remaining cells must work harder. If the remaining cells are affected by alcohol and drugs, they will not be able to take over the duties of the dead cells. That means skills a person could have regained are now lost.

More problems in balance, walking or talking

For people whose brain injury has caused difficulties with balance, movement, and speech, alcohol and other drugs further reduce ability in these areas.

Increasing the chance to do or say something without thinking first

Acting before thinking can be a common problem for people with brain injury, and for people who abuse alcohol and drugs. Not being able to control what they say or do can lead to increased risk-taking,

arguments, or other socially inappropriate behaviour. People may not be able to use skills to control behaviour as well when drinking or using drugs.

Worsening problems with thinking, such as concentration and memory

Alcohol and other drugs make it harder to learn or relearn skills after a brain injury. People may have trouble with concentration, memory, problem-solving, and other thinking skills. Alcohol and other drugs can also interfere with learning new information.

Feel more effect from alcohol and drug use

Because there are fewer cells after a brain injury, more alcohol or drugs go to fewer cells, increasing the impacts. The person becomes intoxicated more quickly, and the effect is much greater. In addition, alcohol and other drugs interfere with the effectiveness of prescribed medications.

More likely to feel low or depressed

Depression is common after a brain injury. Some people may try to cope by drinking alcohol (a depressant) or using other drugs. While

people may “forget” their problems for a while, they are still there when sober. An endless cycle can be established, with depression leading to drug use, which leads to increased depression. This behaviour decreases overall ability, increasing depression even more.

Causing a seizure

Some people with a brain injury have an increased risk of seizures. Those at very high risk are given medication to prevent them, which alcohol and drugs can stop from working. Alcohol and other drugs increase the chance that even those at the lower levels of risk will have a seizure.

More likely to have another brain injury

A person who has difficulty thinking clearly, walking smoothly, or reacting quickly due to brain injury is three times more likely to have another injury; further clouding abilities with alcohol or drugs creates an even higher risk. Subsequent injuries destroy even more brain cells, leaving even fewer to do the same jobs. Some abilities will be lost because of fewer cells to make these functions possible.

For more information, you can reach out to the Acquired Brain Injury Partnership Education and Prevention Coordinators.

North Education & Prevention Coordinator

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NOTE: This material is for information only and should not replace information from a doctor or health care professional.

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General inquiries can be sent to:

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The E&P Coordinators can also be found on social media:

