

OH, MY HEAD!

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT BRAIN INJURIES

The scarecrow desperately wanted some gray matter to replace his noggin full of straw. But most of us don't give a thought to our precious, irreplaceable brains. Unfortunately, there's no wizard to give us another brain if we damage the one we're born with!

What is a brain injury?

A brain injury is [any trauma to the head](#). The most common causes of brain injuries are:

- Bicycle accidents
- Car crashes
- Falls
- Work-related mishaps
- Contact sports

Of course, not all brain injuries are the same; the severity, symptoms, and treatment depend on many factors. Here's a look at a number of symptoms, some of which may indicate a more serious condition.

Brain injury symptoms

- Mild headaches that won't go away
- Memory difficulties
- Poor concentration or organizational ability
- Difficulty solving problems
- Slow speech or thought
- Confusion
- Neck pain

- Loss of balance or coordination
- Dizziness
- Sensitivity to light
- Blurred vision
- Ringing in the ears

More severe injuries may result in

- Spinal fluid coming out of the ears or nose
- Loss of consciousness
- Dilated or unequally sized pupils
- Respiratory failure
- Paralysis
- Slow pulse or slow breathing rate
- Vomiting
- Body numbness or tingling
- Loss of bladder or bowel control

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If you suspect a brain injury

While none of these symptoms by itself indicates a definite brain trauma, don't take any chances.

Consult your doctor immediately, especially if the symptoms happen just after a blow to the head.

Should you go to an urgent care center or emergency room? It all depends on the severity of the condition. You should probably go directly to an emergency room if you notice any of these symptoms:

- Severe bleeding
- Multiple facial cuts
- A change in the person's level of consciousness
- A possible spinal cord injury

If possible, go to a facility that is a certified center for handling stroke and brain injury, where the staff will be aware of new protocols and treatments for brain injury.

Preventing brain injuries

Of course, no one goes looking for a head injury, but accidents do happen. That's why it's important to take some simple precautions to keep you and your family safe.

Car safety

- Always wear a shoulder/lap seatbelt.
- Buckle children in the appropriate car seats for their weight and height.
- Never drive after drinking, using drugs, or taking certain types of medications.
- Don't ride with anyone impaired by alcohol or drugs.
- If you are a short person sitting close to the steering wheel with an air bag, you can be seriously injured if the air bag inflates. Consider the option of a steering wheel that adjusts up and down and in and out. Keep the steering wheel as far away as possible from your chest and head. Consider buying a car with adjustable gas and brake pedals that can keep you farther away from the air bag.

- Children under age 14 should never sit in the front seat of a car.
- Find out more about car safety restraints for children in the health center for children on MyHumana, your password-protected personal page at **Humana.com**

Bike and sports safety

- Wear a helmet for bike riding, motorcycle riding, roller blading, skate boarding, and all-terrain vehicle riding.
- Wear the appropriate headgear for football and other contact sports.
- Before letting children use playground equipment, check it for sturdiness and soft landing surfaces – and always require adult supervision!

Home safety

- Use non-slip mats in the bathtub and shower.
- Install grab bars in the tub and shower.
- Use a step stool (not a chair) to reach objects up high.
- Use banisters and handrails and make sure they're securely fastened.
- Use safety gates at the top and bottom of stairs if you have young children.
- Install window guards on all windows that are not emergency exits, especially windows above the first floor.
- Keep guns unloaded and locked in a safe place and store the bullets in a separate, locked location.

Bottom Line:

Don't count on a wizard to take care of your brain. Take a few simple steps to protect your family and yourself. It could be a matter of life and death.

Sources: The Brain Injury Association of America: www.biausa.org

Brain Injury Resource Center: www.headinjury.com

National Library of Medicine: www.nlm.nih.gov