



Attention and Brain Injury

This handout describes how brain injury may affect attention, a complex thinking skill. A list of resources is also included.

What is attention?

“Attention” is a complex thinking skill that has many different parts. Attention includes the ability to focus on a task or a thought. Attention also lets you come back to a task or thought after doing or thinking about something else. Problems with attention will also affect your ability to remember things if you can’t focus long enough to take in new information.

Why does a brain injury affect attention?

Any type of brain injury can affect attention. Different parts of the brain help manage different kinds of attention, such as being able to:

- Direct your attention to a specific task or thought.
- Notice visual details in your environment.
- Keep your focus on a task or thought.
- Focus on only one thing and ignore distractions.
- Switch your attention from one thing to another.
- Focus on more than one thing at a time.

What happens with attention problems?

People with attention problems may find that it is hard to:

- Listen to other people talk.
- Read a story, a magazine article, or a book chapter from start to finish.

- “Tune out” distractions.
- Watch a TV program or movie.
- Drive. This is because attention is not focused on other cars and all the other factors of driving.

What can make attention problems worse?

- Fatigue and lack of sleep.
- Stress or illness.
- Doing something you are not interested in.
- Medicine side effects.
- Depression.

When should I ask for help with attention problems?

You may want to ask for help if you find that:

- Your attention problem stops you from being able to complete normal daily activities, including tasks at home, work, or during leisure time.
- Your attention problem prevents you from caring for yourself or your family.
- You have thoughts or feelings that affect your ability to pay attention.
- Your attention problem seems to be getting worse.

What can I do about attention problems?

Take care of your body:

- Exercise regularly.
- Eat a well-balanced diet.
- Get plenty of sleep.
- Wear your hearing aids.
- Take breaks during the day.
- Follow a daily, weekly, and monthly routine.
- Try to only do one thing at a time.
- Make sure you have the right prescription for glasses or contacts.
- Wear your glasses or contacts.
- Ask your doctor about medicines that can help you pay attention.

Change your environment:

- Make sure you have enough light to see what you are doing.
- Do activities in a quiet place.
- Turn off the TV or radio.
- Work in a clean and uncluttered environment.
- Do things that need your attention at times of the day when you have the most energy.
- Wear ear plugs when you are reading or looking at something.
- Ask people to speak slowly and clearly.
- In a busy place, such as a restaurant, face away from the crowd.

Practice paying attention:

- Face the person you are speaking with.
- When talking with another person, summarize or repeat the key ideas back to them.
- Remind your brain to “focus” as you are doing an activity.
- Take notes.
- Say the steps of a task out loud while you do the task.
- Set aside distracting thoughts when you are trying to focus.
- Practice doing the things that are hard for you, in small steps.

Where can I learn more about attention?

Ask a professional:

- Talk with your doctor or health care provider. Sometimes medicines may be prescribed for attention problem.
- Talk with your psychologist about ways to improve attention.
- Talk with a speech and language pathologist or occupational therapist. They can give you ideas on ways to improve your attention.

Check out these resources:

Brain Injury Association of America

www.biausa.org/

8201 Greensboro Drive, Suite 611, McLean, VA 22102

703-761-0750

Brain Injury Information Hotline: 800-444-6443

Questions?

Call 206-598-4295

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help at any time.

Rehabilitation Medicine:
206-598-4295

University of Washington
Traumatic Brain Injury
Model System:
www.tbi.washington.edu

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
MEDICAL CENTER
UW Medicine

HARBORVIEW
MEDICAL
CENTER 
UW Medicine

Rehabilitation Medicine

Box 356167

1959 N.E. Pacific St. Seattle, WA 98195
206-598-4295

Brain Injury Association of Washington

www.biawa.org/

3516 S. 47th Street, Suite 100, Tacoma, WA 98409

253-238-6085

Helpline: 800-523-5438

E-mail: info@biawa.org

Multiple Sclerosis Association of America

www.msaa.com

706 Haddonfield Road, Cherry Hill, NJ 08002

856-488-4500

National Brain Tumor Foundation

www.braintumor.org

22 Battery Street, Suite 612, San Francisco, CA 94111

Patient Line: 800-934-2873

E-mail: nbtf@braintumor.org

National Multiple Sclerosis Society

<http://was.nationalmssociety.org>

Greater Washington Chapter

192 Nickerson St., Suite 100

Seattle, WA 98109

800-344-4867

E-mail: greaterWAinfo@nmsswas.org

National Stroke Association

www.stroke.org

9707 E. Easter Lane, Englewood, CO 80112

800-STROKES (800-787-6537)

Alzheimer's Association

www.alz.org

225 N. Michigan Ave., Fl. 17, Chicago, IL 60601

Helpline: 800-272-3900

National Parkinson Foundation

www.parkinson.org

1501 N.W. 9th Avenue, Miami, FL 33136-1494

800-327-4545

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