



Pain, Headaches, and Brain Injury

This handout describes how brain injury may affect pain and headaches. A list of resources is included.

What is pain?

We feel pain when the brain senses there is possible injury or illness somewhere in the body. Pain tends to take one of two forms:

- **Acute pain** usually comes on suddenly and goes away when the problem is diagnosed and treated.
- **Chronic pain** is pain that persists, even though the original wound or injury has healed.

What is a headache?

A headache is pain in your head. Headaches may be a symptom of something wrong in your body, stress, muscle tension, or they may have no known cause. Many people have headaches after their head injury. Some people have a headache all the time, and some people's headaches come and go.

Why does a brain injury affect pain and headaches?

Pain and headaches are still not completely understood, but research is ongoing. This means that health care providers are always learning more about pain and headaches.

People with mild, moderate, or severe head injuries may have pain and headache problems after their injury. Most of these headaches are not migraine headaches. People with mild brain injuries are most likely to report pain and headache problems after a brain injury.

What happens with pain and headache problems?

Pain and headache problems can make it hard to do the things you used to do. Pain and headaches can interfere with your ability to sleep, work, care for yourself, or enjoy life. You may not be able to do your

favorite activities as often, or you may find yourself stopping in the middle of an activity because your pain or headache gets worse.

What makes pain and headaches worse?

- Fatigue and lack of sleep.
- Stress or other illness.
- Tight scalp, neck, face, upper back, and shoulder muscles.
- Abruptly stopping some medicines.
- A history of migraine headaches before your brain injury.

When should I ask for help with pain or headaches?

Talk with your health care provider if your pain or headaches:

- Stop you from caring for yourself or your family.
- Are getting worse – this can be the sign of a serious medical problem.
- Prevent you from enjoying your daily life.

What can I do about pain and headaches?

Follow recommendations from medical professionals:

- Take your pain and headache medicines exactly as your doctor or health care provider directs you. Talk with your health care provider before you change how much medicine you take or how often you take it.
- Follow a daily exercise program.
- Speak with a psychologist or therapist about your pain experience.
- Use heat or ice as directed by your health care provider.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Avoid regular use of caffeinated beverages or alcohol.
- Get proper rest.

Learn more about coping with your specific pain experience:

- Act quickly when pain or a headache starts. You may be able to stop it from getting worse.
- Learn what factors tend to make your pain better or worse.
- Keep track of your headaches in a journal. Note the time of day and month, and what you were doing, when they are the most intense.

Learn ways to relax:

- Cut down on things that cause you stress.
- Do yoga or tai chi.
- Practice deep-breathing techniques.
- Listen to a guided imagery tape.
- Practice meditation.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Take a walk outside.
- Pet a cat or dog.
- Get a massage.
- Hold hands with your partner.
- Dig in the garden.
- Keep a routine in your life so that you feel more in control.

Try things to distract you from your pain:

- Do one of the activities listed above.
- Talk to a friend or family member.
- Do a favorite hobby or activity.
- Watch TV or a movie.
- Help someone else – volunteer.

Where can I learn more about pain and headaches?

Ask a professional:

- Your doctor or health care provider.
- Your psychologist.
- A physical or occupational therapist.
- A pain specialist. (Ask your doctor for a referral.)

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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