

# Understanding Acquired Brain Injury

## What is an acquired brain injury?

An acquired brain injury (or ABI) is any sudden damage to the brain that happens any time **after** you are born. It can change how the brain normally works. The changes can be temporary or permanent. Changes can be different for each person depending on the type of injury, how bad the injury is, and the part of the brain injured.

Acquired brain injury is sometimes called a 'hidden disability'. That is because it can affect how you think and/or your behaviour, and it might not be easy to spot.

## What can cause an acquired brain injury?

An acquired brain injury can result from:

- injury to the head (such as car accident, hitting your head in a fall)
- stroke
- not enough oxygen to the brain (such as a near drowning or cardiac arrest)
- brain tumour
- infection
- increased pressure in the brain

**Note:** There are other conditions that can result in damage to the brain and affect thinking skills but they can have different features from ABI (such as Alzheimer's disease and Multiple Sclerosis).

## How can an acquired brain injury affect me?

After a brain injury, there might be changes in your physical ability to do activities, behaviour, mood, and thinking skills (cognition).

### Examples of physical changes

- fatigue (feeling more tired than usual)
- loss of movement or strength
- change in balance and walking
- headaches
- pain
- loss of taste and/or smell
- seizures
- problems seeing and/or hearing
- problems with sexual function

### Examples of behaviour and mood changes

- irritated easily and/or often
- doing things on impulse (not thinking of consequences before acting or making a decision)
- trouble starting activities
- inappropriate behaviour
- self-centeredness
- low mood or depression
- changes in sexual behaviour

### What is cognition?

Cognition (say *kog-nish-un*) is a set of thinking skills that you need to plan and carry out the things you need to do every day. A brain injury can affect some, but not all, of our thinking skills because different thinking skills are located in different parts of the brain. Sometimes a problem with one area of thinking can also affect other areas of thinking.

### Examples of changes in thinking skills

- Problems paying attention or concentrating
  - being easily distracted
  - spending more time daydreaming
  - missing important details in tasks
  - losing track in the middle of a conversation
  - trouble staying on task
- Problems interpreting what you see
  - trouble recognizing numbers, letters, objects, or colours
  - trouble looking around your surroundings to find things
  - trouble recognizing faces and places
- Problems processing information
  - getting overwhelmed when there is a lot of activity
  - trouble understanding what people are telling you or what you are reading
  - needing extra time to complete activities
  - trouble dealing with more than one thing at a time
- Problems remembering
  - forgetting where you have put things
  - forgetting something you have already done
  - forgetting familiar routes or journeys
  - forgetting what someone just told you
  - repeating conversations or stories
- Problems with thinking processes
  - less awareness of safety or showing poor judgement
  - trouble organizing the day
  - not able to anticipate and/or solve unexpected problems (for example, if an appointment is cancelled or a ride doesn't show up)
  - finding it difficult to plan and carry out activities such as grocery shopping or banking
  - trouble 'seeing' your own strengths and challenges

### What can I do to support a healthy brain?

Your healthcare team might recommend a rehabilitation plan to support your recovery.

Other things you can do to help yourself:

- Sleep and rest.
- Drink water (unless you have been told differently because of a medical condition).
- Eat healthy.
- Do different physical activities, as advised by your doctor.
- Try not to do too many activities in one day.
- If you're feeling anxious or depressed, talk with your doctor and healthcare team.
- Avoid drinking alcohol or using recreational drugs (they can make your symptoms worse).