

Let's Talk About...

Acquired Brain Injury Characteristics

Acquired brain injury is a brain injury that happens any time after birth. Injuries that happen before birth are different. Acquired brain injury can affect personality and many different parts of the body. Children and teens that have a moderate to severe brain injury may have physical, emotional, and thinking symptoms. These changes can range from very mild all the way to severe. These changes may last days, weeks, or months.

Each child's injury acts differently after the injury. Sometimes we can predict the effects a child will have by the part of the brain that was injured. However, many parts of the brain work together, so an injury to even a small area may affect many things.

Here are some longer-lasting effects of brain injury that may happen:

Physical Effects

- Headaches
- Sensitivity to light and noise
- More risk for seizures
- Sensory problems
- Difficulty with balance and being coordinated
- Hearing or visual changes or problems
- Changes in muscle tone
- The body has trouble controlling heart rate and blood pressure (central autonomic dysfunction or storming)
- Difficulty swallowing and chewing
- Difficulty talking and communicating
- Loss of bowel and bladder control
- Poor endurance, tires easily
- Hormone changes

Cognitive (Thinking) Effects

- Decreased attention and alertness
- Not knowing where, when, or who they are (orientation problems)
- Less able to concentrate and focus on an activity, short attention span the brain gets tired after thinking for a long time and starts to slow down (cognitive or mental fatigue)
- Memory problems, usually problems with new memories instead of old memories
- Difficulty learning something new
- Less ability to reason and make safe decisions and judgments
- Problems understanding how one's actions affect others (social awareness)
- Problems with "executive functioning", which includes:
 - Problem solving
 - Planning and organization
 - Working memory
 - Self-regulation
 - Self-monitoring
 - Self-initiation
 - Emotional control
 - Inhibition

Behavioral Effects

- Impulsiveness, or lack of inhibition getting stuck on an idea, word, or request (perseveration)
- Agitation
- Easily frustrated, low tolerance level
- Irritable

- Self-centered
- Aggression or violent behavior

Emotional Effects

- Personality changes ranging from an exaggerated personality to very little emotional expression (flat affect)
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Mood swings (emotionally lability)
- Laughs or cries at the wrong times

Sleep Effects

- Sleeps more than usual
- Drowsy or tires easily with daily routine
- Has trouble falling asleep
- Has trouble staying asleep

You may not notice these problems for weeks, months or even years after the injury. It depends on the part of the brain that was injured and developing at the time. It is important to talk with your healthcare providers if your child has any of these issues. Your healthcare providers can help figure out the cause. They can also develop a plan and strategies to help your child recover and succeed.

Note: Ask your nurse for other handouts in this series that address recovery and helpful things you can do for your child.