Common reasons for pain after TBI

HEADACHE

Most people with TBI have headaches at some point after injury. For many people the headaches start right after their TBI. But for some people they can start weeks, or even months, after their injury. There are several types of headaches. To learn more, refer to the infocomic TBI and Headaches.

NEUROLOGICAL OR NERVE PAIN

The brain and central nervous system process pain signals. These signals are usually caused by tissue damage or injury. When a nerve is injured it can cause different kinds of pain than you may feel after damage to other types of tissue. Nerve pain can feel “electric” or like “burning”; it could also feel like hot or cold; or even give you a sensation of numbness or “tingling” in your arms or legs. These types of pain often need to be treated with special prescription medications. Chemical changes in the brain can also cause the feeling of pain without obvious damage or injury.

MUSCLE OR BONE PAIN AND CO-OCCURRING INJURY

Often other parts of the body get hurt when TBI happens (i.e. fractures, disc injuries, torn ligaments). Pain from multiple injuries can be harder to treat because the symptoms may add to each other.
Finding What Works
There are many different strategies that people use to manage their pain. Some of them are:
- Exercise
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Scheduled rests or Pacing
- Meditation
- Biofeedback
- Breathing exercises
- Visualization
- Hypnosis
- Art therapy
- Acupuncture
- Massage
- Heat or ice
- Social activity

There are many different causes of pain and even more ways for people to manage it.
Sometimes I don’t realize I’m getting a headache until it’s too bad to ignore. When I have a headache it’s hard to focus or even think about anything but my pain.

On Demand Pain Management

Strategy #1

MINDFULNESS: Acknowledge your pain and examine it as you would with something you’ve just discovered. Study how it feels, the emotions you have in response to it, and how your body reacts to those sensations and emotions. Then direct your attention to the sounds around you. After you’ve examined those, repeat this with your other senses (sight, smell, touch).

LIKE MOST PEOPLE, MY HEADACHES BEGAN RIGHT AFTER MY TBI. BUT THEY CAN START WEEKS, OR EVEN MONTHS, AFTER AN INJURY.

WHAT WORKS FOR ME MAY NOT WORK FOR YOU. DON’T GET DISCOURAGED IF YOU HAVE TO TRY A FEW DIFFERENT THINGS.

I USED AN ACTIVITY LOG AND LEARNED THAT MY HEADACHES ARE CAUSED MAINLY BY FATIGUE.

HOW’S IT GOING MO?

EVEN IF I’M HAVING A GOOD DAY, IF I DON’T PACE MYSELF THINGS CAN GO DOWNHILL REALLY QUICK.

SOMETIMES I DON’T REALIZE I’M GETTING A HEADACHE UNTIL IT’S TOO BAD TO IGNORE. WHEN I HAVE A HEADACHE IT’S HARD TO FOCUS OR EVEN THINK ABOUT ANYTHING BUT MY PAIN.

Hey Mo are you ok? Why don’t you take off early tonight?

Once I’m in pain, I can’t function...

I used an activity log and learned that my headaches are caused mainly by fatigue.

Even if I’m having a good day, if I don’t pace myself things can go downhill really quick.

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Managing Your Activity

PACING is taking breaks through your day, or an activity. This allows you to do more over time. Pay attention to how your body feels during and after activities. That will help you shift from stopping something after you’re in pain, to pausing before you feel pain. Pacing helps you do the things that are important to you while still conserving your energy. Learning to pace takes practice.

DELEGATING is finding ways to have other people do some things, so you can save energy which is likely to help with pain.

- Use a grocery service or app instead of going to the store yourself.
- Ask your partner to carry the laundry to the machine and then you wash and fold it.

ADJUSTING is finding ways to do things that might be draining or time consuming, which can also help lessen pain.

- Instead of cooking every night you could use a slow cooker to make several meals at once.
- Lay your clothes out before you go to bed to save time in the morning.

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But I know we all have different experiences. Anyone else want to share?

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https://msktc.org/tbi
### Activity Log

You can use this log to track activities or events that may be related to pain. This log can also be used to record your pain management practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date/Time</th>
<th>What was happening? (Event or activity)</th>
<th>For how long/When?</th>
<th>Did you have pain? (0-10) (Where?)</th>
<th>Other emotions?</th>
<th>What thoughts did you have?</th>
<th>What did you do in response?</th>
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Authorship and Illustration

This infocomic was written by Silas James and Ayla Jacob and illustrated by David Lasky and Tom Dougherty, in collaboration with the Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center.

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