



Traumatic Brain Injury in Older Veterans

While often associated with Servicemembers in combat situations, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is a significant problem among older Veterans as well. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, each year more than 10,000 persons age 65 and older die as a result of TBI, 55,000 are hospitalized, and 80,000 visit the Emergency Room¹. Older Veterans represent a rapidly growing population with a specific set of risk factors for TBI that differs from that of the general population.

VA Polytrauma System of Care: A Network of Specialists and Resources

VA's Polytrauma System of Care (PSC) serves Veterans with injuries that result in physical, cognitive, and psychological impairments with associated functional disability, including TBI. This state-of-the-art, national system provides comprehensive, high-quality, and interdisciplinary care to patients and their families. Teams of clinicians from a range of fields develop and implement an individually-tailored rehabilitation plan to foster recovery as quickly and as completely as possible.

VA provides age-appropriate and injury-specific rehabilitation care to Veterans through the PSC. The PSC offers varying intensity and specificity of services and clinician linkages across its integrated Polytrauma Rehabilitation Centers, Polytrauma Transitional Rehabilitation Programs, Polytrauma Network Sites, Polytrauma Support Clinic Teams, and Polytrauma Points of Contact located throughout the nation.

How Older Veterans Can Avoid TBI

Older Veterans can reduce the risk of TBI either from falls, accidents or other causes, by following some simple precautions²:

- ▶ Exercise regularly (4-5 times a week for 30 or more minutes) to keep your muscles fit, your balance and coordination optimal and your bones strong. Remember to check with your doctor before starting an exercise program.
- ▶ Make your home safer by removing loose items from the stairs and floors, using appropriate lighting, clearing an uncluttered walkway to all areas, installing grab bars in

your bathroom, or using a non-slip mat on slippery surfaces like bathtubs.

- ▶ Have your doctor review the medicine you take with you and your family. As people age, the effects of medicine can change and lead to drug interactions, drowsiness, or light-headedness.



- ▶ Have your vision and hearing checked—poor vision can increase the probability of a fall, and decreased hearing may make you more susceptible to a car accident if you cannot hear vehicles and traffic.

Know the Signs and Symptoms

Older Veterans who sustain a TBI may experience a variety of effects. Most are evident just after the injury, although some may take days or weeks to fully appear. Some symptoms such as loss of balance, coordination, strength, memory, sleep, and independent functioning may be assumed to be a normal aspect of aging. In actuality, they may be the result of a brain injury.

Also, since the natural results of aging can sometimes lead to reduced memory and confusion, a traumatic event may not be recalled by the patient (or their elderly caregiver). If the older Veteran was alone when the traumatic event occurred and if the event was minor or trivial, the older Veteran often will not likely remember the occurrence. Consequently, TBI-related symptoms are either not recognized by the older patient or family/caregiver, or incorrectly associated with the onset of dementia or the “normal” aging process.³

Be sure to contact your local VA and get screened if you or someone you know is experiencing TBI-like symptoms:

- ▶ Physical effects may include occult fractures or soft tissue trauma with new or worsened pain, general or focal weakness, poor appetite, trouble speaking, limited vision, fatigue, a loss of hearing, impaired walking, and balance difficulties.



The Road to Recovery: Rehabilitation

While older Veterans may experience slower and less complete recoveries from TBI, meaningful recovery is still possible regardless of age. VA provides intense rehabilitation services to those with persistent difficulties and deficits from a TBI. These specialized services have been shown to be both cognitively and physically beneficial to the recovery process.

VA's Polytrauma System of Care provides an integrated system of specialized rehabilitation programs to enhance recovery after TBI, including:

- ▶ Brain Injury Rehabilitation
- ▶ Mental Health and Psychological Support
- ▶ Blind and Low Vision Rehabilitation
- ▶ Pain Management
- ▶ Driver Rehabilitation Program
- ▶ Assistive Technology Rehabilitation
- ▶ Community Reintegration Services
- ▶ Vocational Rehabilitation
- ▶ Residential Transitional Rehabilitation Program

For More Information

The Polytrauma System of Care website provides extensive information and background on TBI, related benefits and services, treatment facilities and rehabilitation programs. It also offers multimedia materials including related videos and pictures, as well as links to key partners and resources.



- ▶ Behavioral effects may include irritability, anxiety, depression, disinhibition, and inappropriate behaviors.
- ▶ Cognitive effects may include lack of attention and concentration, memory loss, and difficulty solving problems.

Who Should be Screened?

Generally, if someone you know is not acting like themselves and you suspect they may have fallen, then an evaluation is advised.

If you believe that you may have a TBI or know someone who does, contact your local VA and ask for the polytrauma/TBI point of contact or visit www.polytrauma.va.gov to locate appropriate contacts in VA's Polytrauma System of Care.

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1. <https://tbitac.norc.org/download/tbifactsheet--older%20adults.pdf>
 2. http://www.cdc.gov/traumaticbraininjury/pdf/PreventingBrainInjury_Booklet_508_080227.pdf
 3. <http://www.cllp.org/clinical/DiagnosticIssues.pdf>

Please contact your local VA and ask for the polytrauma/TBI point of contact.
For more information visit www.polytrauma.va.gov or www.caregiver.va.gov