

## Preventing falls and brain injury

### *The Health Column*

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Brain injury or acquired brain injury refers to any damage to the brain that occurs after birth. That damage can be caused by an accident or trauma, stroke, brain infection, alcohol, drugs, or by diseases of the brain such as Parkinson's disease.

Brain injury is common. Over 600,000 Australians have an acquired brain injury. Three out every four of them are under the age of 65. As many as 2 out of every 3 of these people acquired their brain injury before they turned 25. Three out of every four people with acquired brain injury are men. Often there are no visible signs that they are experiencing ongoing issues. While the outcome of the injury depends largely on the nature and severity of the injury itself, appropriate treatment plays a vital role in the level of recovery.



The leading cause of acquired brain injury is stroke, where the supply of blood to the brain is stopped by a clot or bleeding. It often results in physical disability as well as changes in a person's thinking and emotions. Around 60,000 new strokes occur every year - a number that's growing as Australia's population ages. Strokes normally occur in older aged people, but around one in every five strokes happens to a person aged under 55.

Brain Injury Australia is the national acquired brain injury advocacy body representing the needs of people with an acquired brain injury, their families and carers. It works at a national level to ensure that all people living with acquired brain injury have access to the support and resources they need to optimise their social and economic participation in the community. The terms 'head injury' and 'acquired brain injury' are widely used to describe all types of brain damage which occur after birth (with the exception of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder).

Acquired brain injury is a complex and individual condition. The damage can be caused by a variety of things including accident or trauma, stroke or other cardiovascular disease, alcohol or drug abuse. It can also occur through diseases of the brain, such as Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, and dementia. Acquired brain injury is distinct from intellectual disability. People with a brain injury may have difficulty controlling, coordinating and communicating their thoughts and actions but generally retain their intellectual abilities.

One of the biggest causes of acquired brain injury is accident or trauma – known as traumatic brain injury. Such injuries are the result of a blow to the head or other external force. While traffic

accidents, sports injuries and assaults account for some of these cases, a significant number of these injuries are caused by falls.

Falls are the most common accidents among older people. Changes to eyesight and balance, weaker muscles, stiff joints and slow reflexes can make people unsteady as they age. This can increase the risk of tripping at home and in public places. It is important to ensure you have good lighting, wear supportive, non-slippery footwear and consider putting handrails around your home. Regular exercise at a moderate level on all or most days of the week is also important to improve flexibility, balance and muscle strength. As always, prevention is better than cure.

Certain medical conditions or medicines can also increase the risk of having a fall. There is a higher risk of falls when taking multiple medicines, starting a new medicine, or changing the dose of your medicine. Your pharmacist can help to identify medicine-related problems and provide advice on how to reduce or avoid side effects.

To reduce the chances of having a fall:

- manage your medicines and medical conditions carefully
- understand the effects of your medicines
- move carefully – don't rush
- exercise regularly
- wear supportive shoes
- keep your home environment safe
- ask for help if you feel unsteady
- limit alcohol intake.

Falls are a major cause of brain injury and preventing falls is an important health consideration. Your pharmacist can provide information on medical conditions, side effects of medications, mobility aids and other products which may assist in preventing falls. You can get more detailed information on preventing falls from the Self Care Fact Card titled *Preventing falls* available from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to [www.psa.org.au/selfcare](http://www.psa.org.au/selfcare), then click 'Find a Self Care pharmacy near you'.