How common are sleep problems following a TBI?

Many people who have brain injuries suffer from sleep disturbances. Not sleeping well can increase or worsen depression, anxiety, fatigue, irritability, and one’s sense of well-being. It can also lead to poor work performance and traffic or workplace accidents. A review of sleep disorder studies and surveys suggest that sleep disorders are three times more common in TBI patients than in the general population and that nearly 60% of people with TBI experience long-term difficulties with sleep. Women were more likely to be affected than men. Sleep problems are more likely to develop as the person ages.

What are types of sleep problems?

Sleep disturbances have been found in people with all severities of brain injuries – from mild to severe. Sleep is a complex process that involves many parts of the brain. For this reason, and depending on the location and extent of injury, many different kinds of sleep disturbances can occur after brain injury.

Why does a brain injury affect sleep?

You may need extra sleep while your brain is trying to heal from the brain injury. Even if you had a mild brain injury, you might have sleep problems. Your brain might also be having a hard time making or using the natural chemicals that help you fall and stay asleep. It is also possible, especially after a serious injury, that the brain’s electrical rhythms have been disrupted.

A brain injury may also affect control of breathing, dreaming or leg movements. Or, if you have other physical injuries that are causing pain, this pain may affect your ability to sleep.

Common sleep disorders include:

..Insomnia: Difficulty with falling asleep or staying asleep; or sleep that does not make you feel rested. Insomnia can worsen other problems resulting from brain injury, including behavioral and cognitive (thinking) difficulties. Insomnia makes it harder to learn new things. Insomnia is typically worse directly after injury and often improves as time passes.

..Excessive Daytime Sleepiness: Extreme drowsiness.

..Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome: Mixed-up sleep patterns.

..Narcolepsy: Falling asleep suddenly and uncontrollably during the day.

Common sleep syndromes include:

..Restless Leg Syndrome (RLS): Urge to move the legs because they feel uncomfortable, especially at night or when lying down.

..Bruxism: Grinding or clenching teeth.

..Sleep Apnea: Brief pauses in breathing during sleep, resulting in reduced oxygen flow to the brain and causing loud snoring and frequent awakening.

..Include meaningful activities in your daily schedule.

..Get off the couch and limit TV watching.

..Exercise every day. People with TBI who exercise regularly report fewer sleep problems.

..Try to get outdoors for some sunlight during the daytime. If you live in an area with less sun in the wintertime, consider trying light box therapy.

..Don’t nap more than 20 minutes during the day.
Talk to your doctor

If your sleep problems persist, talk to your doctor to explore safe and effective solutions. Evaluation of sleep problems should include a thorough history of such problems, medication review, an assessment of your bedtime routines, and a comprehensive medical evaluation. Before recommending any action, your physician will explore with you a variety of possible causes for your sleep problems, including pain or depression. If necessary, he or she may recommend a polysomnographic evaluation (also known as a sleep lab). Based on your symptoms, medical history and specific needs, your doctor will be able to make a personalized treatment plan to help you achieve restful sleep.

Treatment options

Non-pharmacological therapies

- If mood or emotional issues such as anxiety or depression are causing sleep difficulties, psychotherapy (counseling) may be an appropriate treatment.
- Sleep restriction may improve sleeping patterns by restricting the number of hours spent in bed to the actual number of hours slept.
- For those with anxiety, relaxation therapy can help create a restful environment both in your bedroom and in your body and mind.
- Use of special bright lights (phototherapy) has been shown in studies to help promote sleep. When exposed to these lights at strategic times in the day, you may be able to sleep more at night. However, consult with your doctor first, as these bright lights can cause eyestrain and headaches.

Medications

Ask your doctor about medications that can help you sleep through the night or keep you awake during the day. Special care is necessary when choosing a medication in order to avoid daytime sedation or worsening of cognitive and behavior problems.

Natural remedies

Some consumers have found herbal teas, melatonin and valerian useful for sleep problems, and these are sold in health food and drug stores with no prescription needed. However, these remedies have multiple drug interactions, and you should tell your doctor if you are using them.