



Opioid Use Among People with Traumatic Brain Injury (Plain-Language Version)

Intersecting Research on Opioid Misuse, Addiction, and Disability Services

What are opioids?

Opioids are a kind of drug that treats pain. While they do help get rid of pain, there are also a lot of problems with using opioids. They are very addictive, so people may keep taking them even after their pain has gone away. Opioids can also be very dangerous when people use them for a long time. Long-term use of opioids can also make the pain worse.

What is a traumatic brain injury?

If someone is hit in the head or their head hits against something, it can hurt their brain. This is called a **traumatic brain injury**, or TBI. After a TBI, people may have problems thinking, concentrating, remembering, keeping track of what they are doing, or solving a problem. Their mood may also change more quickly after a TBI.

Why do people get addicted to opioids after a TBI?

- People can have a lot of pain after a TBI. Having pain for a long time is one of the main reasons why people get opioids and take them for a long time.
- Most people with more severe TBIs get opioid medications when they are in the hospital.
- People who struggle with drug or alcohol addiction are more likely to have TBIs. People who have had a TBI are more likely to die by accident if they take too many drugs at once.



About 9 in 10 people with a TBI who die from an accidental overdose die from drugs or alcohol.



About 6 in 10 of these deaths are from drugs like opioids.

Why do people get addicted to opioids after a TBI?



People with TBIs have problems thinking, concentrating, and remembering. People who have problems remembering may not know when to take their medication or how much to take. They may become addicted if they take too much medicine or take it at the wrong time.



Some people become more stressed out or depressed after a TBI. Opioids can make people feel calmer. Some people take them to feel better and get rid of their pain.

Why do some people need extra help?

Because many people who have had TBIs end up using opioids, it is important for doctors, politicians, researchers, and other people to know how to help people who are using opioids after a TBI.

- It can be hard for people who have had a TBI and use opioids to get help for problem opioid use.
- Sometimes people who have had a TBI don't have enough money to get help.
- Some insurance companies won't pay for the kinds of doctors or hospitals that would help people with TBIs who use opioids.
- Some doctors won't give people any painkillers if they are trying to stop using opioids. If people don't have any help at all with their pain, or quitting opioids safely, they may do things that hurt themselves.
- Some people have doctors and other helpers who don't share information with each other about what they need. It is important for doctors and other helpers to talk to each other so everyone knows what is going on.

How can the government, organizations, and researchers help?

Using opioids after a TBI can be very dangerous. It is important to find ways to help people with TBI who are taking opioids. People should get help with using opioids safely or reduce opioid use after TBI, and help to address the reasons why they are taking opioids.

These kinds of help should work well for people who have a hard time concentrating, remembering, keeping track of what they do, or solving problems:



Making sure people have help from their families, friends, and community.



Staying away from places that make people want to take more opioids or other drugs.



Making sure that people have support for a long enough time so they can get better and stay better.



Using medications that work to treat opioid use disorder.



Doing research on ways to help people who have both had a TBI and use opioids.

If people who have had a TBI can get good help, they can live better lives. If they don't get good help, many bad things might happen: some people may lose their job, marriage, or home. They may even die. Having programs and making new rules that give people the right supports can help them get and stay better.

Adapted by Finn Gardiner from Adams, R.S., Corrigan, J.D., & Dams-O'Connor, K. (2019). Opioid use among individuals with traumatic brain injury: A perfect storm? *Journal of Neurotrauma*, 36:1-6.

How to Give Credit

Adams, R.S. Corrigan, J.D., Dams-O'Connor, K., & Reif, S. Opioid Use Among People with Traumatic Brain Injury (Plain-Language Version). *INROADS Issue Brief*, March 2020. Brandeis University, Waltham, MA.

Disclaimer & Acknowledgments

We thank Finn Gardiner for designing this Issue Brief. INROADS is funded by a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant number 90DPGE0007, PI: Sharon Reif). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this brief do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, or HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.