

**Alcohol and Drug Use Following Traumatic Brain  
Injury**

**Patient Information Booklet**



**Talis Consulting Limited**

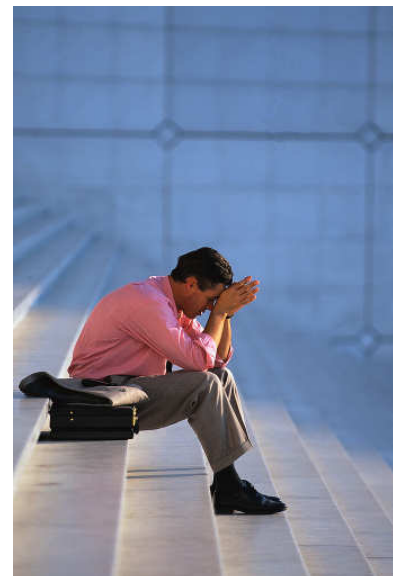
## Why does Alcohol and Drug Use Matter after a Head Injury?



Alcohol and drugs affect our behaviour, experiences and feelings through altering the way in which our brain cells work. Following a head injury areas of your brain will have been damaged; therefore interfering with the performance of your brain cells by consuming alcohol or drugs can have additional consequences. Consuming alcohol or drugs can exaggerate the symptoms of head injury.

Alcohol and drug use can become a problem for those who have suffered a head injury for many reasons. For example, those with a head injury may be more likely to consume alcohol or take drugs because:

- **Judgement is impaired:** you may no longer be able to make appropriate decisions about whether to take alcohol or drugs, or about when you have had enough and need to stop.
- **Impulsivity is more of a problem:** you may be more likely to consume alcohol or drugs on a whim rather than as a well considered decision.
- **Stress may become a problem:** some people turn to alcohol or drugs to help them deal with the stress of recovering from a head injury.
- **Depression may become a problem:** it is normal for people recovering from a head injury to become depressed, and this can cause some people to drink or take drugs.
- **People may feel socially isolated following a head injury:** some people turn to social drinking and drug use in order to have a way to interact with others and to hide their lack of confidence.

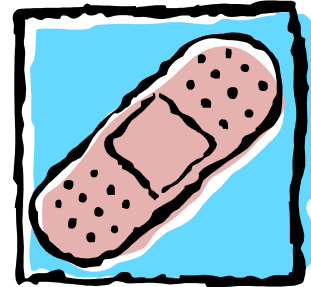


## Why can Consuming Drugs or Alcohol be a Problem Following a Head Injury?

### *1). Drugs or alcohol will affect the recovery process*

If you are taking non-prescription drugs and alcohol whilst your brain is recovering from a head injury, then the recovery process can be affected.

For example, self-repair mechanisms in the brain may not be able to function so effectively. Moreover, you may not recover as well if taking drugs or alcohol as you would otherwise. Any progress you have made since your injury may be affected if you take drugs or too much alcohol.



### *2). Drugs or alcohol can add to the effects of your injury*

Taking drugs or alcohol after a head injury can cause some symptoms of head injury to worsen. For example, following a head injury many people have problems with:

- Disordered thinking (or poor thinking processes)
- Inappropriate behaviour and impulsive behaviour (such as saying or doing things without thinking)
- Memory
- Control over emotions
- Balancing and walking
- Speaking
- Headaches
- Risk-taking behaviour due to poor judgement

### *3). Alcohol and drugs can increase the likelihood of seizures.*

Following a head injury one of the problems which may arise is that of experiencing epileptic seizures. Alcohol and drugs can increase the risk of a seizure, even if you are only at a low risk to begin with. Moreover, if you are placed on anti-seizure medication, then alcohol and drugs can prevent this medication from working as effectively.



## Why can Consuming Drugs or Alcohol be a Problem Following a Head Injury? (continued)



*4). Alcohol and drugs can interfere with prescription medication you may be taking.*

It is possible that you will be prescribed medication to help you in your recovery from a head injury. Many medications can interact with alcohol and drugs, meaning that their treatment effectiveness may be lowered, or that side effects associated with the medication may be worsened.

*5). You may not be able to tolerate drugs or alcohol as well following a head injury*

Following a head injury you may find that your tolerances to alcohol or drugs are significantly lowered. This means that effects of drugs or alcohol will be felt after consuming far less than you usually would.



## Can I Drink Alcohol at all Following my Head Injury? And if so, When Can I Drink?

It can be very difficult to know whether someone who has experienced a head injury should drink, and when it is safe for them to drink. There are certain general guidelines which can be followed, but the question of if and when to drink must be based on your individual circumstances.

It is often recommended that before any alcohol is consumed time is spent recognising the changes which have occurred since your head injury. It is important to have an accurate idea of what your abilities and problems are so they can be monitored and considered.

If you do decide to start drinking again, then make sure you keep your intake low. You may have to completely relearn your tolerances to alcohol and what your limits are. This is specific to you, what is low to one person can be a lot to another.

However some people find it hard to recognise when they have reached their limit as a head injury can disrupt insight and awareness. If you feel that this may be a problem, then ask someone whose opinion you trust to give you honest feedback about when you have had enough. Make sure you are both aware that this is not criticism, but honest advice to help you regain your awareness of limits and appropriate drinking behaviour.



If you are still on medication, then as a general rule of thumb you should avoid alcohol. However if you are unsure then ask your doctor about whether you should be allowed to have a small amount of alcohol if you want to.



## What can be Done to Help?

### *Discuss methods of coping with stress in a positive way*

Some people turn to drugs or alcohol to help when they feel stressed, therefore consider more appropriate ways to deal with stress when it arises.



Consider methods such as relaxation training; consciously relax the muscles in your shoulders, neck and jaw while breathing slowly and deeply. You might also find that indulging in activities you enjoy, like reading a good book, or taking a walk, will help you to take your mind off things which cause you stress help calm you down.

If you feel that stress is one of the main factors which influences your drug or alcohol consumption, then talk with your Clinical Psychologist about stress management techniques and relaxation exercises.

### *Keep enjoyable activities to fill your day*

Boredom and social isolation can contribute to overuse of drugs or alcohol. Plan your days well in advance so that you stay interested and motivated throughout the day. You might also like to consider taking up a new hobby, or you might wish to take up gentle exercise to help alleviate boredom and social isolation.



## **Useful Websites:**

**[www.headway.org.uk](http://www.headway.org.uk)**

**- A useful web site with much information about brain injury and rehabilitation in the UK.**

**[www.birt.co.uk](http://www.birt.co.uk)**

**- Another useful web site concerning brain injury, with downloadable leaflets about brain injury and its implications.**

**<http://www.drinkaware.co.uk/>**

**- A website devoted to alcohol consumption and the effects of alcohol.**

**<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/alcohol/Pages/Alcoholsupport.aspx>**

**- Pages from the NHS giving support and advice for those with alcohol problems**

**<http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk/>**

**- The website of alcohol concern, the national agency of alcohol misuse**

**<http://www.talktofrank.com/>**

**- The A-Z of drug information.**

**<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/drug-misuse/Pages/Introduction.aspx>**

**- Pages from the NHS giving support and advice on substance abuse and drug problems**

