



## Alcohol and Drug Use After Traumatic Brain Injury: Why Not?

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It often seems as if our society is filled with temptations to drink alcohol. There are television commercials and billboards advertising beer, wine, and liquor. If you attend a sporting event or a music concert, beer and wine will be sold. When you go to a party, the first thing that the host or hostess usually does is to offer you a drink. Drinking alcohol is often a part of peoples' lives-- a way to socialize and to relieve stress. While other drugs, such as marijuana, cocaine, and ecstasy, may not be as openly used, they are frequent in certain nightclubs and in certain social circles. Many people feel positively about using alcohol and drugs-- especially in moderation. However, there are many negative consequences of using alcohol and drugs. These negatives include having bad judgment when under the influence of alcohol and drugs, and being more likely to get injured.

For some of you, alcohol or drugs may have been involved in your injury. Maybe you were drinking or using drugs at the time, or maybe you were hurt by someone else who was using. Whether or not alcohol or drugs were involved in causing your injury, they can be harmful to you after your injury. Here are some reasons why alcohol and drugs may be even more harmful after injury.

- ✓ After injury, your brain is more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol and drugs. You may have been able to drink a 6-pack before injury and not feel much different. After injury, you may feel the effects of alcohol or drugs more quickly, so that just a little can affect your judgment or make it difficult to walk.
- ✓ If you are like most people who have a traumatic brain injury, you are probably taking some type of medication. Alcohol and other drugs can have negative interactions with medications commonly prescribed after injury, including seizure medications, medications used to make you more awake and alert, and medications to help you sleep. In some cases, the interactions of alcohol and other drugs with prescribed medications can be fatal.
- ✓ Many people with traumatic brain injury have difficulty with thinking, memory, and concentration. Use of alcohol and other drugs can make these

problems worse.

- ✓ In some people, use of alcohol or drugs can increase the risk of having a seizure after injury. The risk of seizures is usually low after injury, but it is something that you want to prevent.
- ✓ Using alcohol or drugs increases the possibility that you will have a second injury. When people are under the influence of alcohol or drugs, they tend to do things that they wouldn't normally do. This includes things that are not always safe, like driving too fast, driving with others who have been drinking, and standing too close to the edge of a balcony. We are never at our safest when drinking or using drugs.

The biggest reason to not use alcohol or drugs after injury is that it can interfere with your personal goals- for recovery and after. Most people who have TBI cannot wait to resume the activities that they enjoyed prior to injury. These activities can include work and school, but they also include social and leisure activities, continuing relationships, and forming new relationships. Using alcohol or drugs can make it more difficult for you to reach your goals in these areas. It can make your injury-related problems worse and can interfere with your relationships. Many people see positive aspects to drinking and using drugs- like feeling closer to their friends or feeling more comfortable and relaxed in social situations. You must decide for yourself if these things outweigh your goals for recovery and for life.

Many times, it is hard for people to stop drinking or using drugs on their own. In this newsletter, we are including tips that you can use to stop drinking. We are also including some resources that you can turn to for information and/or assistance. While we encourage you to seek help, the final decision is yours. Professionals who do substance abuse counseling know that people will only stop using alcohol or drugs when they are ready to- when they have decided that there are more negatives than positives for using.

So you see- it's all up to you! You have overcome so much to get to this point! In order to have your best chance at recovery, make the choice to stay away from

# Tips to help you to stop drinking\*

## **Make a list of reasons to stop drinking.**

Different people have different reasons to stop drinking. For example, possible reasons may relate to your general health, recovery from injury, relationships with family and friends, getting and keeping a job, saving money, the interaction with medications, and thinking skills. Some of these reasons may apply to you, or you may have different reasons to stop drinking. Write down the reasons why you want to stop drinking. Refer back to this list to help you remember why you have decided to stop drinking.



## **Get support.**

Talk to your family and friends about your decision to stop drinking, and ask for their support. Stay away from people who are not supportive of your decision or who give you a hard time about not drinking.

## **Watch out for high-risk situations.**

High-risk situations are situations in which you feel tempted to drink. These situations may involve certain people, places, or time of day. For some people, high-risk situations occur when they have a strong emotion, like anger, frustration, or sadness. Be aware of your high-risk situations, and stay away from people or places that you associate with drinking.

## **Develop an emergency plan to cope with high-risk situations.\*\***

Create an emergency plan that you can follow when in a high-risk situation. An emergency plan may include leaving the place or changing the situation, delaying the decision to drink for 15 minutes, thinking of something unrelated to drinking, reminding yourself of your success in staying away from alcohol, calling a supportive friend, and challenging your thoughts about drinking (e.g., ‘Do I really need a drink?’).

## **Explore new environments and activities that do not involve drinking.**

There are many situations and activities that do not involve drinking, just as there are many people who do not drink. Check out activities and events in your community that do not involve alcohol. It may be helpful to ask a friend or family member who does not drink to attend new activities with you, especially at first. Getting involved in alcohol-free activities can help you stop drinking.

## **Learn other ways to deal with stress.**

Do not drink when you are stressed, angry, upset, or have a bad day. To help stop drinking, learn to deal with stress in a way that does not involve alcohol. Exercise, deep breathing techniques, muscle relaxation exercises, yoga stretching, and visualization are common techniques used to cope with stress. For more information about these and other strategies, talk with your doctor, psychologist, or social worker, look for books on relaxation and stress management at your local bookstore, or check the internet.

## **When you feel an urge to drink, distract yourself.**

Develop a list of activities you can do when you feel the urge to drink. Some examples may include exercise, writing an e-mail or letter, calling a supportive friend or family member, playing with your dog or cat, and making a cup of coffee. Refer to your list when you feel the urge to drink. Instead of drinking, do something on your list.

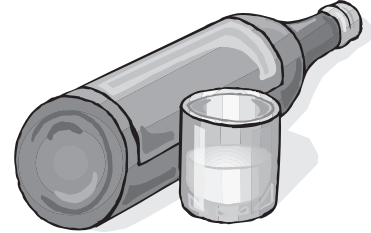
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### Learn how to say “No.”

You may be offered a drink by another person, especially in certain social situations. However, you do not have to drink when other people drink. You do not have to take a drink that another person has given you. Be prepared by practicing ways to say “no” firmly and politely. For example, you can say, “No thank you” or “No thanks, I feel better when I don’t drink.”

### Remove alcohol from your home.

Removing all alcohol from your home can also help you to stop drinking.



### Talk to your doctor.

If it has been hard for you to stop drinking, it may be helpful to talk to your doctor or other healthcare professional, like a psychologist, counselor, or social worker. They can help you get more information about treatment options in your community, such as support groups, individual counseling, and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

Some people develop a physical dependence on alcohol, which means that their body has difficulty functioning without alcohol. As a result, they can have serious problems when they suddenly stop drinking. These problems or symptoms are known as ‘alcohol withdrawal,’ and include tremors, confusion, hallucinations, restlessness, increased blood pressure and seizures. Persons who may be physically dependent on alcohol should talk to a doctor before they suddenly stop drinking. The doctor will help plan a treatment to stop safely.

\*adapted from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), NIH Pub Nos. 96-3770 and 07-3769

\*\*adapted from Corrigan J, Sparadeo F, Ferris R. (June 2003). TBI and Substance Abuse. Webcast presented by the National Association of State Head Injury Administrators, the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the Health Resources and Services Administration, and the US Department of Health and Human Services.

## Resources on Substance Abuse

Ohio Valley Center for Brain Injury Prevention and Rehabilitation

<http://www.ohiovalley.org/abuse/index.html>

<http://www.ohiovalley.org/abuse/prog/index.html>

<http://www.ohiovalley.org/abuse/umannual/index.html>

Brain Injury Association of America: Substance Abuse Issues after Traumatic Brain Injury

<http://www.biausa.org/elements/BIAM/2004/substanceabuse.pdf>

TBI Challenge!: Family Guide to use of Alcohol and Other Substances After Brain Injury

<http://www.biausa.org/Pages/related%20articles/article.family%20guide%20to%20use.html>

Substance Abuse and Brain Injury: Judith Falconer, PhD

<http://www.brain-train.com/articles/substanc.htm>

SynapShots: Charlotte Institute of Rehab. & Ohio Valley Center for BI Prevention and Rehab.

<http://www.synapshots.org/SAandTBI/index.html>

