

TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY & DRUG TREATMENT

Once the patient is medically stable and consciousness has started to recover, drugs can be used to help control a range of symptoms although they do not specifically stimulate recovery of the brain. Indeed, after a brain injury, the brain may be more sensitive than normal to the side effects of drugs (especially those with sedative effects). Therefore in principle, rehabilitation tends to be concerned with reducing and tailing off drug treatment rather than introducing new drugs.

Sedative drugs, and alcohol in particular, should be avoided where possible since they are thought to delay the recovery of brain function.

However there are some situations in which a spell of drug treatment, usually time-limited, *may* promote rehabilitation from traumatic brain injury. Some of these are as follows:

- Antibiotics for the treatment of bacterial infections
- Anticonvulsant medication to diminish the risk of epilepsy
- Drugs acting on the bladder or bowel to restore continence
- Painkillers
- Drugs that reduce anxiety levels (used only on a short-term basis while other means of reducing anxiety are implemented)
- Anti-depressant medication (unlikely to be indicated until later stages of recovery, under psychiatric advice)
- Drugs to modify the occurrence of sudden outbursts of aggressive behaviour (these should never be used as a substitute for careful analysis and understanding of behaviour; they act principally by slowing the speed at which anxiety and aggressive feelings build up, allowing the person more time to recognise when they are in danger of losing control, and to learn how to take avoiding action)
- Antispastic medication for those who experience involuntary stiffness or spasms in the muscles of the limbs or trunk
- Stimulant drugs (such as bromocriptine) may occasionally help to promote alertness in patients who have recovered consciousness but who are unable to respond to rehabilitation therapies because of persistent and severe sleepiness (not to shorten the duration of coma)
- Drugs that can help restore normal sleep patterns if they remain disturbed later in recovery, such as melatonin
- Hormone replacement therapy if the function of the pituitary gland has been upset

This note is for information only and does not constitute medical or legal advice.