

# CHAPTER 4

## General Health

In this chapter, you will:

- Learn how nutrition and general health can aid your recovery.
- Discover some tips on safe medication usage.
- Read how alcohol and illegal drugs can adversely affect your recovery.

## Nutrition

Brain injury may change the way you relate to food. For some survivors memory problems may affect food intake. Damage to the brain can cause an inability to feel full or hungry, causing you to eat too much or too little without realizing it. You may have a changed or absent sense of taste or smell. This often happens in the earlier stages of recovery and may disappear as time goes on. This could also be a side effect of medication you are on.

The simplest way to manage many nutritional concerns is to create a meal plan and record what you are eating. This way, if you have problems remembering when you ate, or cannot tell when you feel full, you can refer to the record you are keeping.

### **Canada's Food Guide**

Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating provides basic information on good nutrition, encouraging you to enjoy a variety of foods. Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating identifies the four food groups and recommends the number of servings per day required by healthy Canadians. Factors such as age, weight, gender, activity, and medical concerns will influence how many servings are required from each of the four groups. Serving sizes can be adjusted to meet individual needs.

Emphasize cereals, breads, other grain products, vegetables, and fruit. Ensure that individual needs for energy, protein, and other nutrients are met. A nutritional assessment and follow-up by a dietitian may be required. Your doctor can probably recommend a dietitian for you to contact.

When choosing foods, take into account any problems you have with swallowing or food allergies. A speech-language pathologist can assess and treat swallowing problems; a dietitian can help with food allergies. Speech-language pathologists may be accessed through your Regional Health Authority or your local Alberta Brain Injury Network office (see Resources, Chapter 13).

Choose low fat dairy products, lean meats, and food prepared with little or no fat.

If you are overweight, you may need to control portion sizes as well as fat content. If you are underweight or have increased energy requirements, you may need to eat higher fat foods to achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

You can also achieve and maintain a healthy body weight by participating in regular physical activity. Keep in mind that you may be restricted in what you can do because of poor balance, poor vision, fatigue, or other complications resulting from your brain injury. Keep looking for something that you are physically able to do, that you enjoy, and that contributes to your therapy. Physical,

recreational, or occupational therapists may provide advice on the kinds of activities most suitable for you.

Limiting salt may help control high blood pressure and fluid retention if you have these concerns. Caffeine, which is found in coffee, tea, some colas, and chocolate, is a stimulant. Your ability to tolerate caffeine may be very limited, and it may be best to avoid all caffeine, especially in the initial stages of recovery. Even if the stimulating effect of caffeine is not a problem, Health Canada suggests having no more than four cups of brewed coffee (or the caffeine equivalent in other foods and beverages) per day.

Eating well is an important part of recovering from illness and maintaining good health. Follow Canada's Food Guide. If you are concerned about your nutritional needs, ask your doctor for a referral to an outpatient dietitian.

## **Medications**

Since taking more than one medication at a time can lead to drug interactions, it is important for the doctor writing the prescription and the

pharmacist to know which drugs are being taken. If you have problems with memory, you can carry a list of your medications to show the doctor and the pharmacist, or you can have a friend or family member accompany you with the list. Go to the same pharmacy for all your prescriptions, and share the list with the pharmacist even when buying non-prescription or over-the-counter drugs, since interactions can occur with these as well.

### **Follow Instructions**

It is essential to follow instructions when taking medication. Drugs are most beneficial when taken in the right dose, at the right time, in the right way. Not following instructions may prevent the drug from doing its job and may cause serious side effects.

Pharmacists will usually give you an instruction sheet each time you fill a prescription. If they do not automatically give you one, ask for it. It will provide important information, such as common side effects and what you can do about them, drugs that should not be taken at the same time, and special instructions to ensure the drug is most effective, such as taking it between meals or with food. Take time to discuss any questions with your pharmacist.

## Memory Aids

If you have problems with your memory, there are several aids available that can help you take medication correctly. Purchase a **dosette**, a plastic container with separate pill compartments for different times of the day and different days of the week. Ask your pharmacy if they can put medications in individual bubble packages with labels showing the time and day pills in each package should be taken.

If you have a serious memory impairment, you may need an advocate to remind you when it is time to take your medication.

## Commonly Used Medications

Since the changes that can occur from a brain injury vary widely, many different medications may be prescribed, based on necessity. This list of medications may include:

- **Anti-convulsants:** if you have seizures (convulsions) following the injury, you will probably be given a prescription for an anti-convulsant. The purpose of these drugs is to prevent seizures. The need for anti-convulsants will be re-evaluated by your

physician on an ongoing basis. The drug may only be needed for a few months, but you should discuss the expected duration with your physician. Do not increase or decrease the dose without consulting your physician first.

- **Anti-depressants:** Some survivors and their caregivers experience depression. Depending on the level of depression, the physician may prescribe anti-depressants to help relieve feelings of sadness and hopelessness.

Although originally used only to treat depression, this class of drugs is now proving useful in other situations as well. You may be given anti-depressants to help you have restorative sleep – the kind of sleep that makes you feel well-rested. They may be prescribed to help deal with certain types of pain, or they may be given to help decrease impulsiveness and emotionality, without causing the same side effects as other drugs.

- **Anti-spasmodics:** following brain injury, muscles in certain parts of the body may be tighter than usual. This may cause pain and altered use of the affected joints. Anti-spasmodic drugs help loosen muscles, which

reduces pain and makes it easier to move joints properly.

- **Analgesics (painkillers):** you may experience some level of pain following a brain injury. Headaches and pain from tight muscles are two of the more common reasons for taking analgesics. Non-prescription painkillers, such as acetaminophen, are often useful for occasional pain relief. In more severe or chronic cases, a prescription medication may be required.
- **Psychotropics:** if you have problems with impulse control, meaning you do things without thinking about the consequences of your actions, you may be given psychotropic drugs. Acting without care for consequences can lead to embarrassing and even dangerous situations, and psychotropics may be helpful in controlling some impulsive behaviours.

## Alcohol And Illegal Drugs

Survivors of brain injury should abstain from alcohol consumption. This is extremely important in the initial stages of recovery. Alcohol affects the brain's ability to function.



When the brain is already damaged, the effects of alcohol are more pronounced. Alcohol affects the brain in the following ways:

- limits recovery;
- increases problems with balance, walking, and talking;
- increases the likelihood of saying or doing things impulsively;
- interferes with the ability to think and learn new things;
- increases the chance of becoming depressed;
- increases the chance of having a seizure; and
- increases the chance of having another brain injury.

Consuming alcohol after a brain injury will likely increase complications. You may choose to ask your family or friends to help you by abstaining from drinking alcohol themselves.

If you were consuming alcohol to excess before the injury, additional help may be needed to change this pattern.

Find a health professional familiar with both alcohol abuse and brain injury to help you.

Most illegal drugs, such as marijuana and cocaine, hold the same dangers for survivors as alcohol. If you did not use illegal drugs before your injury, it is important to continue to abstain from use. If you did use illegal drugs before the injury, you may need the assistance of experienced drug counselors to stop. Continued drug use will put you at an extremely high risk of further brain injury.

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