Traumatic Brain Injury in Children and Teens

While bumps and bruises are generally considered harmless rites of passage in childhood, traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a serious public health problem among children in the United States that can be debilitating or deadly. Traumatic brain injury can result from a strong blow to the head occurring because of a fall, hit or jolt. Symptoms of TBI, which vary depending on the severity of the injury, can include cognitive issues, such as memory loss; emotional changes; trouble sleeping; and death. In addition to adults over the age of 65, children under the age of 4 and adolescents between 15 and 19 years old are the most likely age groups to sustain a TBI.¹

Each year in the United States there are over 62,000 children under the age of 19 who sustain brain injuries,² and it is a primary cause of death among youth less than 24 years of age.³ Children and adolescents who experience traumatic brain injury often face serious disruptions in important developmental processes, such as learning, emotional awareness and social functioning.⁴ In addition to being damaging, TBI is also costly. The Brain Injury Association of America estimates the costs resulting from traumatic brain injury at $60 billion annually.

Traumatic brain injury has been gaining national attention in recent years. Healthy People 2020 specifically calls for a ten percent reduction in traumatic brain injury related fatalities and hospitalizations,⁵ and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have recently updated many TBI-related webpages with important information about the causes, trends and costs of TBI in the United States.

What Can Health Plans Do?

Traumatic brain injury is a multifaceted public health problem that requires efforts from both the public and private sectors as well as parental and community involvement. Health plans have an important role to play in the prevention of TBIs among children and adolescents:

- Health plans can support helmet giveaway programs for youth; it has been shown that every bicycle helmet saves health insurers $57.⁶
- Health plans can encourage physicians, especially pediatricians to interact with the CDC, the CDC Foundation and the National Football League’s free online training course.
- Health plans can support and encourage member awareness of the many ways to prevent TBI in children and adolescents, including the consistent use of seatbelts, the proper use of helmets in sport and recreational activities and the appropriate storage of firearms in the home.
- Health plans can direct members who have questions about TBI to a wide variety of publicly available brain injury resources, including: the Brain Trauma Foundation, the National Association of State Head Injury Administrators, the Betty Clooney Foundation for Persons with Traumatic Brain Injury and brainline.org.
Traumatic Brain Injury Resources

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The CDC released an important report in October 2011 about traumatic brain injuries related to sports and recreational activities among children under the age of 19. This report found that males suffered TBIs from sports and recreational activities more often than females, and that children who sustained TBIs were more likely to be hospitalized or transferred to other facilities than children who sustained non-TBI injuries. The CDC notes that TBIs often occur during common childhood activities such as bicycling and soccer, although rates differ among age and sex. The CDC also recently updated its traumatic brain injury webpage, which offers information for the public on TBI diagnosis, statistics, outcomes and prevention.

Heads Up

The CDC’s Heads Up prevention initiative is designed to be an interactive resource for families and individuals who want to learn more about brain injuries, including concussions. Heads Up has a Facebook page and Twitter account, and it releases podcasts to disseminate information to a wide variety of people. Heads Up provides information related to many aspects of head injury, including prevention during sports and recreation activities. Heads Up also features an interactive training course sponsored by the CDC, the CDC Foundation and the National Football League, for physicians to increase their knowledge and head injury skill set related to sports. This training course is free and earns physicians continuing education credits.

The Federal Traumatic Brain Injury Program

The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), with authority from the Federal Traumatic Brain Injury Program, provides funds to states to improve access to health and other services for individuals with traumatic brain injury and their families. Grants support state efforts to develop an infrastructure capable of responding to and treating traumatic brain injuries. HRSA runs a Technical Assistance Center to help grantees with the planning and development of programs for individuals with TBI and for their families. HRSA’s TBI webpage also provides information for individuals or organization interested in learning more about TBI including federal TBI program publications, archived webcasts and links to external resources.

Brain Injury Association of America

The Brain Injury Association of America (BIAA) is the country’s largest brain injury advocacy organization. The BIAA offers resources for individuals who have sustained a brain injury and their families. The BIAA is also a leading source of information for brain injury advocates and has chapters nationwide, which offer direct support, information, education and advocacy. The pediatric brain injury site from BIAA includes information on symptoms, recovery and prevention of pediatric brain injuries.

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4 Ibid.
