

5. Lifestyle

Nutrition and weight management

Nutrition tips for people ageing with traumatic brain injury

Keeping a balanced diet is really important for staying healthy as you age. Following the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating¹⁸, which includes eating a variety of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and protein foods, usually gives you all the vitamins, minerals, and fats you need. But as you get older, there are some specific things to keep in mind, because certain foods can help our brains and bodies age better.



Here are some things to know:

Protein needs increase: As you get older, your body needs more protein. For example, if you weigh around 70 kilograms, you should aim to eat about 70 grams of protein per day, which is about 1 gram for every kilogram of your body weight.¹⁹ Good sources of protein include lean meat, chicken, fish, tofu, legumes (like lentils), eggs, yoghurt, nuts, and cheese.

Fish: Fish is sometimes called “brain food” because it’s rich in unsaturated fats (omega-3 fatty acids) and protein, which are thought to be good for brain health.²⁰

Important vitamins and minerals:

You should make sure to get enough of these vitamins and minerals:

- **Calcium (for strong bones):** found in milk, cheese, and yoghurt.
- **Iron (for carrying oxygen in the blood):** found in beef, poultry, beans, and leafy greens.
- **Vitamin D (for bones, cell growth, and a healthy immune system):** found in milk and fish, but our bodies also make it when we’re in sunlight.
- **Vitamin B6 (for a healthy immune system):** found in potatoes, beans, meat, chicken, and fish.
- **Vitamin B12 (for healthy blood and nerve cells):** found in meat, chicken, fish, and dairy products.

Weight management after brain injury

Although many people worry about gaining weight as they age, losing weight can also be risky for older adults.²¹ So, it’s important to focus on maintaining a healthy weight as you get older – not gaining or losing a large amount of weight. Keeping a healthy weight can be challenging after a brain injury. There are biological and lifestyle factors that can affect your weight:

Biological factors may include:

- Losing your sense of smell, which can affect how things taste and lead to eating too little or too much.
- Hormone issues that affect appetite.
- Damage to parts of the brain that control appetite or judgment.

Lifestyle factors may include:

- Being less active because of physical or social limitations.
- Losing regular routines, like going to work, which can lead to eating out of boredom or skipping meals.
- Worries about money, which can lead to choosing less healthy foods.

Tips for maintaining weight as you age:

Keep track of what you eat and plan meals:

Writing down what you eat and planning your meals can help you eat healthier and save money.

Eat a balanced diet: Include lots of veggies, fruits, whole grains, and protein foods like lean meats and fish.

Make small changes: Small changes over time can make a big difference. For example, try cutting back on sugar, drinking water instead of soft drinks, or choosing whole grain bread.

Stay active: Find activities you enjoy, like walking the dog or taking classes with friends, to stay active most days of the week. See the physical activity section for more tips.

See a dietician: Dieticians can provide specific advice on how you can improve your diet, according to any specific health needs.

Physical activity

What are the benefits of physical activity for people ageing with traumatic brain injury?

We're all aware that staying active is beneficial for our health, but did you know that for people with a brain injury, physical activity can offer even more advantages? Here are some surprising benefits²²:

Reduce tiredness and fatigue:

Engaging in physical activity can help combat feelings of tiredness and fatigue.

Improve memory and thinking:

Regular physical activity has been shown to enhance memory and cognitive function.

Enhance mood and reduce stress:

Exercise releases endorphins, chemicals in the brain that boost mood and reduce stress levels, providing a natural way to improve emotional well-being.

Promote better sleep: Physical activity can contribute to better sleep quality, helping you enjoy more restful and rejuvenating sleep.

Provide structure to your day:

Incorporating physical activity into your daily routine can provide structure and purpose, promoting a sense of accomplishment and productivity.

Combat loneliness: Participating in physical activities, whether alone or with others, can help reduce feelings of loneliness and foster social connections, enhancing overall well-being.

How much physical activity do I need?

Building up your physical activity levels may take time, but it's important to see it as a long-term plan. Depending on your abilities, aim to gradually increase to²³:

- At least two and a half hours of aerobic physical activity per week (or half an hour, most days). This can include activities like water exercises, swimming, dancing, brisk walking, cycling, housework, and gardening. Try to make it hard enough that you are a bit puffed out.
- Muscle-strengthening exercises on two or more days a week, such as lifting weights, using resistance bands, climbing stairs, and doing squats.
- Balance exercises on three or more days a week. These can include Tai Chi, yoga, or playing games like quoits. A physiotherapist can provide guidance. Also have a look at the section on preventing falls for some suggested exercises.
- Additionally, try to replace sedentary time (like sitting) with movement, such as standing and walking or doing stretches. Simple strategies like standing up during commercial breaks or while on a phone call can help.

It's about finding something you can do. It's not strength, it's not expending (too much) physical energy, but it is just about movement – finding something that suits you.

Tony, lived experience of traumatic brain injury



How to get more active

Introducing a new physical activity routine can be challenging, but here are some strategies to help:

- Seek tailored advice from health professionals like physiotherapists, exercise physiologists, occupational therapists, or your GP, especially if you have muscle and joint issues.
- Start with small amounts of activity and gradually increase.
- Create a weekly program of activities, but be flexible and adjust based on your fatigue levels.
- Keep track of your fatigue levels daily, perhaps using a traffic light system, to know how much to push yourself (see the pacing strategy on *page 57*)
- Use an activity tracker to monitor your efforts and share your progress with your physiotherapist.
- Find what motivates you! This might be being able to take the grandkids for a walk, joining your mates for a round of golf or seeing your step count increase.
- Focus on activities you enjoy, like meeting up with friends for a class, gardening or walking your dog.
- Consider revisiting the rehabilitation exercises you did after your brain injury, for a reset.
- Try active computer games like a Wii Fit.
- Explore team sports or recreational activities in your community, such as walking groups, exercise and dance classes, or lawn bowls.

Where to get help

- **Ausactive:** The website has a directory to help you find an exercise provider for people with neurological conditions and older adults <https://ausactive.org.au>
- **Disability Sports Australia:** Ensures all Australians have access to sport at a recreational and professional level <https://sports.org.au>
- **Disabled Wintersport Australia:** Helps people with a disability participate in wintersports <https://disabledwintersport.com.au>
- **Empower Golf Australia:** Promotes golf for Australians of all abilities <https://empowergolf.com.au>
- **Adaptive Movement:** Helps people to find the right sports activity for people with different types of disabilities <https://theadaptivemovement.com>



Participating more fully in life

Why is this an important topic for people ageing with traumatic brain injury?

As you age, life changes in significant ways, affecting your roles and responsibilities. While you may embrace these changes, you could also start feel a sense of loss as you move away from previous activities and relationships. This transition can lead to feelings of loneliness, being undervalued, or lacking purpose, which can contribute to depression and other health issues, including dementia.²⁴

Finding ways to participate more fully in life

Despite these challenges, there are numerous opportunities to enhance your engagement with the world and improve your quality of life. Here are some questions to consider:

- What activities do you enjoy (or used to enjoy)?
- How can you connect with like-minded individuals?
- What skills and knowledge can you share with others?
- What would give you a sense of purpose or value?

There are countless activities you can engage in to enrich your life:

- Volunteering
- Mentoring others or providing peer support
- Pursuing education through short courses or adult education programs
- Learning a musical instrument or joining a band
- Exploring a new language
- Improving your cooking skills
- Enhancing your computer proficiency
- Participating in creative endeavours, such as photography or sewing
- Joining a choir or community garden
- Maintaining a regular schedule for meals, housework, hobbies, socialising, and exercise

Work

Continuing to work can also provide a sense of purpose, but older adults with disabilities, including a brain injury, often leave the workforce prematurely. If you're not ready to stop working, consider asking for adjustments such as part-time schedules, remote work, or flexible hours. Employers are required to make reasonable accommodations to ensure a safe and productive work environment. Go to: humanrights.vic.gov.au/for-individuals/disability-and-the-workplace/ to check your rights.

Where to get help

- Health professionals, including social workers, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, GPs, and psychologists, can offer guidance and referrals to community resources.
- Brain injury support groups provide valuable assistance and understanding.
- Consider volunteering through platforms like GoVolunteer, which match volunteers with suitable opportunities across Australia. <https://govolunteer.com.au>



Sleep

Why sleep can be a problem for people ageing with traumatic brain injury

Up to 65% of people with brain injury have insomnia symptoms (like trouble falling asleep, trouble staying asleep, waking early).²⁵

As you age, your sleep cycles can change, and you may find yourself sleeping for shorter periods of time. You may also start to enjoy an afternoon nap.

Not sleeping well can affect your physical health by making things like pain and fatigue worse. Poor sleep can also negatively affect your mental health (for example, mood, anxiety, and stress) and cognition (for example, attention). So, both the quality and quantity of the sleep you get is important for healthy ageing with a brain injury.

Signs that you may not be getting enough quality sleep

- Feeling down or sad (depressed mood)
- Feeling flat or numb
- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fatigue (lack of energy and/or motivation)
- Changes in appetite
- Lack of motivation
- Loss of interest in activities or socialising
- Increased pain intensity

How to set yourself up for a good night's sleep

- Try not to nap after 5pm as this may make it harder for you to fall asleep at night.
- Aim for 6 to 8 hours each night
- Stick to a sleep schedule (going to bed and waking up at the same times each day)
- Make sure your room is dark
- Make sure your room is a comfortable temperature
- Limit screen time for at least 2 hours before you go to bed
- Eat a balanced diet and include foods that can help to promote sleep (see *page 25* for a guide on nutrition)
- Make sure you are physically active – staying active during the day can help you to sleep at night as you will be more tired at the end of the day (see *page 26* for a guide on physical activity)
- Reduce stress
- Meditation and breathing techniques can help you to manage stress and calm your mind (see *page 58* for a list of meditation apps)
- Limit alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine (especially in the afternoons) as they are stimulants and could be making it hard for you to fall asleep
- Use a smart phone or smart watch to track your sleep quality
- Use a sleep diary to better understand your sleep patterns (see example on *page 47*)

Where to get help

Snoring, sleep apnoea, or central apnoea may disrupt your sleep quality. You don't have to snore to have central apnoea. You can ask your GP or rehabilitation physician about getting a sleep assessment.



Fatigue

If you just seem to be tired all the time

More than 60% of people with a brain injury feel fatigued and more than 30% of older adults feel fatigued.^{26,27} So, if you are ageing with a brain injury you may be more likely to experience fatigue.

Fatigue can affect your physical functioning, memory, attention, mood, and ability to take part in daily activities.

If you have had a recent brain injury, fatigue may be caused by your brain healing from your injury. If you have had your injury for many years, your brain has to work harder to make up for your injury and this may make you more fatigued (this is called the coping hypothesis).

There are three types of fatigue, and you may experience more than one type.

- **Physical fatigue:** Physical activity makes you feel tired. This type of fatigue often gets better after rest or sleep.
- **Cognitive fatigue:** Having trouble concentrating or feeling 'brain fog'. This type of fatigue can be worse at the end of the day.
- **Psychological fatigue:** Feeling physically and mentally drained or tired. This type of fatigue usually does not get better after rest or sleep.



How to prevent or manage fatigue

- Plan your activities to save energy
- Plan more difficult tasks for when you have more energy (for example, at the start of the day)
- Plan time to rest in between activities
- Balance more active days with less active days
- Use the traffic light system on *page 57*
- Plan light weekly physical activity
- Eat a balanced diet with foods that can help to boost energy
- Manage stress
- Meditation and breathing exercises can help you to manage stress
- Try to get a good night's sleep. Fatigue can be made worse by poor sleep. However, even people who sleep well can experience fatigue
- Limit alcohol and caffeine
- Understand what triggers or brings on your fatigue (for example, not getting a good night's sleep, intense physical or mental activity)
- Use a fatigue diary to help you understand what is making you tired (see example on *page 48*)

Where to get help

Fatigue can be a symptom of many health conditions. Talk to your GP or rehabilitation physician. They can help you to determine the cause of your fatigue.

Some medications are best avoided if fatigue is a problem for you. Talk to your doctors to see if you should consider changing medications.

Fatigue can also be a symptom of depression or anxiety. Talk to your GP about a referral to a mental health professional. Mental health professionals can assess you to help determine the cause of your fatigue.

Alcohol and smoking

Alcohol

Benefits of Reducing Drinking

It's commonly advised by doctors to avoid drinking alcohol for at least the first 12 months after a traumatic brain injury. Even though moderate social drinking might be okay after that (except for those with a history of seizures), cutting back on drinking has several advantages²⁸:

- Lowers the risk of another brain injury – alcohol affects balance, coordination, reaction time, and judgment.
- Keeps cognitive abilities sharp and focused
- Can improve feelings of sadness or depression after a brain injury – many people with a brain injury are more sensitive to alcohol than those without.
- Alcohol can interfere with medication, making it less effective or worsening its effects.
- Reduces the risk of seizures.

To start, you can track how many standard drinks you have each week and compare with recommended limits. You can also use a drinking calculator for guidance: <https://adf.org.au/reducing-risk/alcohol/alcohol-guidelines/>

Where to get help

If you're worried about your drinking habits, it's best to talk to your GP first. They can guide you to the right support services. Some specific places to seek help include:

The National Alcohol & Other Drug Hotline:

A confidential 24/7 phone service offering free counselling and information. Call 1800 250 015.

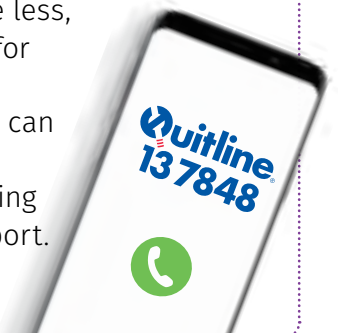
Turning Point: Australia's leading centre for addiction treatment, education, and research. <https://turningpoint.org.au/>

Smoking









Cutting back on smoking can bring significant health benefits, especially for those ageing with a brain injury. Smoking less can reduce the risk of developing dementia and Alzheimer's Disease, and provide other advantages like improved brain function, fitness, strength, and sense of taste and smell. It can also help you fight off infections, reduce stress, and lower the risk of cancer, stroke, and heart attacks.²⁹

Where to get help

If you're looking to smoke less, consult your doctor first for guidance and referrals to appropriate services. You can also seek support from Quitline: A resource offering immediate help and support. Visit <https://quit.org.au> or call 13 7848.



Number of standard drinks per serve:

 White wine 11.5% alcohol 150ml serving (about half a glass)	 Red wine 13% alcohol 150ml serving (about half a glass)	 Sparkling wine 12% alcohol 150ml glass	 Shot spirits 40% alcohol 30ml nip
 Middy/Pot beer 4.8% alcohol 285ml glass	 Schooner beer 4.8% alcohol 425ml glass	 Pint beer 4.8% alcohol 570ml glass	 Can beer 4.8% alcohol 375ml can

Sexuality

Why sexuality can be an issue for people ageing with traumatic brain injury

It is normal for some people to experience physical, cognitive, psychosocial, and psychological changes after a brain injury that affect your sexuality. This may be because of things like damage to the brain, hormonal changes, or medication side effects. So the way you experience and express your sexuality may change after a brain injury.

It is also normal for your sexuality to change as you age, because of things like loss of mobility or hormonal changes. Your sexual responses may also slow down as you get older. So, you may need more time and more touch to become aroused.

Sexuality is a normal part of human functioning, and problems can be addressed just like any other medical issue. Maintaining your sexual function as you age with a brain injury is important to your quality of life.

How might my sexuality change as I age with a brain injury?

Physical changes such as limited movement, chronic pain, loss of sensation, or fatigue.

- Try positioning yourself so you can be mobile but not worsen any injuries or bring on pain. You may benefit from the support of assistive equipment (for example, foam wedge).
- Plan sexual activities during the time of day when you are less fatigued or tired.

Cognitive changes such as memory problems or having a hard time concentrating (for example, being distracted during sex).

- Arrange your environment so you are comfortable and not distracted.

Psychosocial changes such as an increase or decrease in sexual desire or libido (for example, not initiating sex or sexual disinhibition).

- Talk with your partner about any changes you may be experiencing.

Psychological changes such as changes in mood and emotional changes like loss of confidence or poor self-image.

- How you feel physically can impact how you feel emotionally.

Where to get help

Start with a visit to your GP and consider a comprehensive medical exam.

Find a health professional you feel comfortable talking with – there are specialist sexual health therapy and rehabilitation services available (see *page 71* for a list).

Other health professionals may also be able to help with different aspects of your sexuality:

- Physiotherapist
- Occupational therapist
- Psychologist
- Sex therapist
- Endocrinologist
- Gynaecologist/Urologist

