

Using Anti-Depressants After Traumatic Brain Injury?

Source: Ask The Expert – Produced by Victoria Tilney McDonough, Brian King and Karlyn Williams

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Question

Is it safe to take an anti-depressant after a brain injury? My wife never took them before her brain injury. Her depression is a result of her injury, it seems, and she just can't seem to kick it. It's been more than a year now. I'm wondering about their effectiveness and safety after a brain injury.

Answer

Dr. Brian Greenwald: Depression is a huge issue after a traumatic brain injury. We know that depression itself in general is caused by changed chemicals in the brain. We know that people after traumatic brain injury have a changed brain, and changed chemicals in the brain. After a traumatic brain injury the risk of depression is probably about doubled. Somewhere between 40-60 percent are the numbers that you can see over time. This can be very disabling for people after traumatic brain injury to be suffering depression.

Certainly when you're looking at the treatment of depression after traumatic brain injury you want to make sure to look at both counseling, which can play an important part, and also medications. Medications can be effective in treating depression, definitely so. I would say people need to be closely monitored by their doctor for their medications. There are medications, anti-depressant medications, that should be used cautiously or even avoided in people with traumatic brain injury. These are some of the older medications which are usually placed under the category of the tricyclic anti-depressants (TCAs). Examples of these include Amitriptyline also known as Elavil. These can actually have negative effects on people's memory and can a lot have side effects and should be used cautiously. Some of the newer anti-depressants like Paxil or Prozac or Celexa have a lower side-effect profile and probably would be more effective and more appropriate in the treatment of someone with a traumatic brain injury.