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Post Traumatic Amnesia (PTA)

The definition of Post Traumatic Amnesia (PTA) is: *“The inability to remember continuous events, after a blow to the head which causes an alteration of consciousness, even when the patient is apparently awake.”¹*

What is it?

PTA is the time after a period of unconsciousness when the injured person appears to be conscious and awake, but is behaving or talking in a bizarre or uncharacteristic manner. The person has no continuous memory of day-to-day events, and recent events may be equally affected, so that they are unable to remember what happened a few hours or even a few minutes ago.

To complicate the issue, PTA can sometimes occur without the person having been unconscious beforehand.

What are the symptoms?

The most obvious symptom is the loss of memory for the present time. The person may recognize family and friends but be unable to process the fact that they are in hospital or have had an injury of some kind. They may talk and behave as if they are at work, or need to get to a meeting, or are on holiday. They may be very confused, agitated, distressed or anxious, and may even express themselves as if they are being held prisoner and have to escape. Uncharacteristic behaviours may include violence or aggression, both physical and verbal - swearing, shouting, disinhibition (eg taking their clothes off or masturbating, making verbal remarks about other people, etc). In some cases, the person doesn't recognize anyone but will ask for relatives or friends whom they haven't seen for years, or they may believe that they are a child or a much younger person themselves.

The person may also have a tendency to wander off, if they are physically able to, or may try to get out of bed even if they have broken limbs or other injuries. The risk of falls or of causing themselves further injury by pulling out catheters or intravenous drips may be a problem at this time.

On the other hand the injured person may also be very quiet, docile, extra loving and friendly to everyone, clinging or childlike, and whilst his or her behaviour is not threatening or seen as a management problem, this disinhibited behaviour may be equally inappropriate

factsheet

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What can be done about it?

PTA is a stage of recovery that the person goes through after the injury and, whilst it is very distressing for family and friends and may present a management problem for hospital staff, it is important to remember that this is a phase that will pass. An assessment by a neurologist or a neuropsychologist may confirm that it is Post Traumatic Amnesia, but occasionally the psychiatric services will be involved, which causes further anxiety for the family.

Try to stay as calm as possible, seeing other people distressed and not being able to understand the reason may add to the confusion and agitation the injured person is feeling. The brain is struggling to cope with the injury, and too much stimulation is best avoided.

Reduce the risk of harm. This may mean having someone sat with the person at all times, particularly if they are likely to wander off or try to get out of bed. During the day, a rota of familiar faces may be useful, perhaps with an assigned nurse at night. Discuss the situation with the hospital staff.

The person may ask the same things over and over again, which can be very wearing. They may persist with a delusion, but it is best not to correct them or try to force them to remember. This will only make everyone more agitated. Gradually, the person will hold on to more information and begin to make sense of the world around them.

Remember that the person is not in control of their actions and cannot be held responsible for what they do or say. It may be of some comfort to the family to realise that the person who is injured is likely to have little memory of this time, or that it may be experienced as a bad dream.

Be sure to take time out for yourself or to share the visiting/supervision with others. Being overtired adds to already stretched emotions and it is vital to look after yourself.

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How long will it last?

PTA may last for a few minutes, hours, days, weeks or even months.

The duration of PTA is quite a good indicator of the severity of the head injury and its likely long-term effects.

What are the long term effects?

Time in PTA	Severity of injury
Up to 1 hour	Very mild injury, full recovery, though a few may experience post-concussion symptoms.
1 – 24 hours	Moderate injury, likely recovery as above
1 – 7 days	Severe injury. Recovery period longer, may take weeks or months. May be able to return to the same job but less capable than before.
1 – 2 weeks	Very severe injury. Recovery may take many months, and long lasting cognitive problems are likely. Should be able to work and enjoy social/family life.
2 – 12 weeks	Very severe injury. Very prolonged recovery, one year or longer. Permanent deficits are likely. Very unlikely to be able to do same job as before.
12 weeks +	Very severe injury. Significant disabilities requiring long term retraining and management. Unlikely to ever work again, though may manage sheltered workshop type setting.

In general, it has been said that if the person does not return to work within two years of the injury, they are unlikely to ever return. Besides the cognitive problems, the person is more likely to have had more serious physical injuries that may also cause permanent problems.

Further Information

This information is taken from Trevor Powell's 'Head Injury – a practical guide', as well as some of Headway's own booklets. **If you would like to discuss any of the issues covered here, or any other aspects of brain injury, please call our free, confidential helpline on 0808 800 2244. Alternatively, you can email us on helpline@headway.org.uk.**

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