

Posttraumatic Stress in Children

Injuries are extremely common in childhood. In the United States, more than 20 million children experience unintentional injuries each year such as through falls and motor vehicle crashes. Furthermore, more than 200 000 children and adolescents each year are injured by violence.

It is common for parents and children to experience posttraumatic stress after a traumatic injury. Most children and parents report at least 1 severe traumatic stress reaction in the first month after a significant injury, and some have it after even a seemingly minor traffic accident without serious injury. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network defines "pediatric medical traumatic stress" as a set of mental and physical responses of children and their families to pain, injury, serious illness, medical procedures, and painful or frightening treatment experiences. About 19% of injured children develop significant posttraumatic stress symptoms that interfere with their functioning and healing after the injury.

Symptoms of posttraumatic stress include:

1. Repeating thoughts about the injury.
2. Avoiding reminders of the injury, which may include avoiding people, feelings, or activities.
3. Increased arousal, which may include having an exaggerated startle response (ie, jumping in response to a loud noise) or experiencing difficulty in concentrating.
4. Changes in mood.


Consequences of posttraumatic stress may be disabling and include reduced quality of life, increased use of health care services, or difficulty in staying in school. Several treatment approaches for posttraumatic stress exist and have been shown to be effective. These include promoting strategies that help with coping, safe exposure to trauma-related triggers, and building skills in handling the distress that is felt. In many cases, it is helpful for both parents and children to work together on developing coping skills.

If you are worried that you or your child has symptoms of posttraumatic stress, talk with your pediatrician or physician. This month's *JAMA Pediatrics* included a review article that summarizes the current research and evidence on how best to recognize and treat posttraumatic stress.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

National Child Traumatic Stress Network:
<http://www.nctsn.org>

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