

CLINICAL PEARLS | JANUARY 2024

Mild Traumatic Brain Injury and Suicide

Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence

KEY TAKEAWAY

Traumatic brain injury is an important risk factor for suicide as well as for suicidal thoughts and behaviors in both active duty service members and veterans. This association is partially attributed to comorbid psychological and behavioral health conditions that are common in TBI patients.

CURRENT PERSPECTIVE FOR THE MILITARY CLINICIAN

The risk of suicide, as well as suicidal ideation and behaviors, is the highest among young active duty service members, which is comparable to the risk among civilians of the same age group. There is a significant increase in the risk for suicidal ideation and suicide among service members who sustain a TBI, which is associated with comorbid or cooccurring psychological health conditions and combat deployment. The risk appears to increase with the severity of the TBI. TBI and mental health conditions associated with suicide (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder) may result from the same index event or from independent incidents. Currently, there is no single diagnostic tool or method that can reliably determine someone's risk for suicide.

CLINICAL PEARLS

- Screen for suicide risk among service members and veterans presenting with a history of TBI, PTSD, or both, as well as those with other comorbid psychiatric health conditions.
- Identify patient risk factors for suicidal ideation and behaviors and implement validated intervention and prevention measures if warranted.
- Evidence-based screening tools (e.g., Patient Health Questionnaire-9, item 9) in addition to clinical judgement are best for screening for and evaluating suicide risk.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy is recommended for suicide risk management in TBI patients that present with psychological and behavioral symptoms.
- Other forms of cognitive therapy and pharmacological intervention are also available to treat psychological and physical symptoms in select cases.
- Encourage service member and veteran engagement in meaningful community-based, social activities to help mitigate suicide risk.

REFERENCES

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