



COMA

Information on causes of and responses to coma.

WHAT IS A COMA?

Coma is defined as a prolonged state of unconsciousness. The person does not respond to external stimuli. There is no speech, the eyes are usually closed, and the person cannot obey commands.

WHAT CAUSES COMA?

More than 50% of the coma cases are due to trauma to the head or circulatory disruptions in the brain.

HOW LONG DOES COMA LAST?

It is difficult to predict the length of unconsciousness. Coma can last hours, days or months, depending on the severity of the brain damage. It is possible for a person to remain in a comatose state for months or even years.

CAN MEDICATION HELP?

Presently, there are no known medications that will shorten the length of coma. There are some medications that will be used to deepen the level of unconsciousness while others will be used to temporarily paralyze the body. The medicines administered are for the well-being of the comatose person.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE IN A COMA?

Coma is considered a state of unresponsiveness, usually with the eyes closed, with minimal response to voice, touch or even pain.

CAN THEY MOVE, HEAR, OR FEEL PAIN?

A person in coma cannot obey commands; however, they may move in response to touch, pain, or spontaneously. A person in coma may respond to pain by moving or groaning, but usually they have no recall of pain. Some people in coma may appear to be able to hear and understand by squeezing a hand, sucking, responding to touch, or calming down when a familiar voice is heard. Since most persons in coma cannot recall the period of unconsciousness, it is not possible to determine if the comatose person could actually hear and understand. A good rule to follow is, to talk to, and about the person as if they could hear and understand you.

DOES THAT MEAN THEY DO NOT HEAR ME?

Patients who have been in a coma and later awoken, remember little if anything while in that state. They usually do not recognize the voices, but report feeling better with soothing tones. These calming tones can come from family, friends, or hospital personnel.

HOW DO I KNOW WHEN THEY ARE OUT OF THE COMA?

When the loved one can consistently follow simple commands, and negative commands. For example, "Don't grip my hand," or "Don't stick your tongue out."

WHAT IF HE/SHE DOES THESE THINGS FOR ME, BUT NOBODY ELSE?

Because of the careful observation and time spent with the patient, family is usually the first to see subtle changes (command following), followed by the nurses and therapists, then the physicians. Also, after such a severe injury, they fatigue very quickly. Their response to commands may only last a few minutes.

HOW DO PEOPLE ACT AS THEY COME OUT OF A COMA?

It is a gradual process. They may be confused and upset and may not know where they are or what has happened to them. It may take several weeks or longer before the doctors can evaluate the long-term effects of the brain injury.

IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO TO BRING THE PERSON OUT OF COMA?

Once the brain has been injured, it takes time to heal. The effects of familiar people caring for the person with a brain injury are unknown. Take time to touch and talk to the person. Speak to the person as if he/she can hear and understand you.

WHAT CAN I TELL MY CHILDREN ABOUT COMA?

It is difficult to explain brain injury to children. Talk simply and honestly. A social worker may be able to help explain the situation. Like adults, children may experience a variety of emotions while coping with the injury. The Brain Injury Association of Illinois can provide materials to explain brain injury.

Glasgow Coma Scale
(recommended for age 4 - adult)

| Eyes | Score |
|--------------------------------|-------|
| Open: | |
| Spontaneously | 4 |
| To Verbal Command | 3 |
| To Pain | 2 |
| No Response | 1 |
| | |
| Best Motor Response | |
| To Verbal Command: | |
| Obeys | 6 |
| To Painful Stimulus: | |
| Localizes Pain | 5 |
| Flexion - Withdrawal | 4 |
| Flexion - Abnormal | 3 |
| Extension | 2 |
| No Response | 1 |
| | |
| Best Verbal Response | |
| Oriented and Converses..... | 5 |
| Disoriented and Converses..... | 4 |
| Inappropriate Words | 3 |
| Incomprehensible Sounds..... | 2 |
| No Response | 1 |
| | |
| GCS Total | 3-15 |

How Will BIA of IL Help Me?

The Brain Injury Association of Illinois is a statewide non-profit membership organization comprised of people with brain injuries, family members, friends and professionals. Our programs and services include:

ADVOCACY

Individual
Public Policy

EDUCATION

Annual Educational Conference
Educational Materials
Educational Training
Injury Prevention Program
Public Awareness

SOCIAL/RECREATION

Camp FunZone (Pediatric Camp)
Wilderness Endeavor (Adult Camp)

FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

Information & Resources
Support Groups Statewide
Peer Support Program
Toll-free Family Resource Line



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