

CLINICAL PEARLS | DECEMBER 2025

Mild Traumatic Brain Injury and PTSD

Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence

KEY TAKEAWAY

Service members and veterans are at a high risk for comorbid mild TBI and post-traumatic stress disorder. The clinical presentation of coexisting mild TBI and PTSD may appear different than mild TBI or PTSD alone.

CURRENT PERSPECTIVE FOR THE MILITARY CLINICIAN

Diagnosis and treatment of mild TBI and comorbid PTSD is complicated due to overlapping symptoms and clinical features. Exposure to combat can lead to an increased risk of multiple lifetime TBIs and can increase PTSD symptom severity. Blast-related mild TBI may be associated with more severe PTSD symptoms than non-blast related mild TBI. While the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has cleared several tools for measuring blood-based biomarkers to aid mild TBI diagnosis, no biomarkers or imaging techniques can reliably be used alone to provide an objective diagnosis of either mild TBI or PTSD. No biomarker for comorbid mild TBI and PTSD has been identified.

CLINICAL PEARLS

- Screen service members and veterans for PTSD when presenting for evaluation following a known history of mild TBI.
- Consider the mechanism of injury (such as combat or blast-related mild TBI) as a risk factor for PTSD and increased symptom severity.
- Utilize a patient-centered approach for providing holistic treatment to individuals with persistent symptoms of mild TBI and PTSD that includes integrated behavioral health care services and rehabilitation treatment plans.
- Promote participation in rehabilitation programs that address cognitive symptom management and address emotional regulation for individuals with persistent cognitive dysfunction.
- Nonpharmaceutical management of mild TBI and PTSD should be the first choice for treatment; however, if clinically appropriate, SSRIs and SNRIs can be used in some cases to alleviate PTSD symptoms.
- When prescribing medication for patients with both mild TBI and PTSD, consider that some medications can worsen the symptoms of one condition while effectively treating the other.

REFERENCES

- VA/DOD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management and Rehabilitation of Post-Acute Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (2021). Retrieved from www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/rehab/mtbi/
- VA/DOD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Stress Disorder (2023). Retrieved from www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/txessentials/cpg_ptsd_management.asp
- Cognitive Rehabilitation for Service Members and Veterans Following Mild to Moderate Traumatic Brain Injury (2019). Retrieved from www.health.mil/CogRehab-mTBI-CR-Full