How do I help a loved one who has vision loss following a traumatic brain injury?

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) yields similar results to vision as a stroke. There are approximately 8 million head injuries reported each year. Of those, 1.5 million are deemed serious. With TBI, a patient may experience loss of visual field, visual neglect, vertigo, dizziness, impaired eye movements, double vision, eyestrain and difficulty reading, sensitivity to light, dry eyes, visual hallucinations and impaired visual memory. Maintaining independence for persons following a brain injury can be challenging. Many activities of daily living, such as, safe travel, eating, speaking and self-care, can seem difficult or impossible.

Essentially, traumatic brain injury is an insult to the brain such as a blow to the head or neurological dysfunction. The injury can produce cognitive, sensory or physical impairments. Because there is a close relationship between vision and the brain, TBI can disrupt the visual process, interfering with the flow and processing of information. The result is a vision problem along with other issues such as partial paralysis, memory and speech problems.

Hemianopia, the most notable loss of vision, occurs when patients lose vision in one side of their field of vision. Sometimes, patients are totally unaware of this shortfall, bumping into walls or ignoring food on one side of their plate. This visual neglect is a perceptual loss of vision. The person is unaware of their lack of sight on the affected side and is unable to complete a visual picture based on seeing only some of the parts. This makes it difficult to recognize faces and environmental dangers that may put the person at risk for falls.

Due to the major impact of the visual system on cognitive and motor function, the vision rehabilitative needs of a person affected by a traumatic brain injury must be addressed as early as possible. Early intervention following a TBI is paramount to recovery of visual function and general well-being. With proper care and rehabilitation, TBI patients have a chance to regain quality of life, return to work and perform daily activities that are necessary for independence.

The road to recovery should include a team of caring and skilled healthcare providers who specialize in TBI and low vision rehabilitation. Many deficits can be improved or resolved through diligent efforts and rehabilitation provided by a low vision rehabilitation specialist, occupational therapist, speech and language therapist, orientation and mobility specialist, and a certified driving rehabilitation specialist, if appropriate.

In most circumstances, lenses and prisms may result in elimination of double vision and prism lenses may assist in compensation of visual field loss. Magnification, contrast sensitivity, control of glare and management of the visual field loss will also be addressed by a low vision specialist.

If your family member or loved one is affected by a brain injury, you may be one of the most important people in their life. Share your knowledge of how low vision rehabilitation can help them regain their independence.