

A spinal cord injury changes your body in a number of ways. Some are more obvious than others. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle after your spinal cord injury can help you sustain your wellbeing, and reduce your chances of other complications developing.

Healthy eating

A healthy diet is important to maintain your general health and wellbeing as it has an impact on many aspects of your health such as bladder and bowel function, skin and weight maintenance.

Eating well can ensure regular bowel routines and may minimise the amount of medication you require. Eating regularly is important as it helps your metabolism remain stable. Weight gain can affect people after spinal cord injury as metabolism generally slows, as does the level of physical activity.

Maintaining your body weight is important as it will ensure the equipment prescribed to you – for example, a wheelchair, sling or commode – will remain suitable for your body shape and size for as long as possible. Excessive weight gain can place you at risk of developing secondary chronic health complications such as diabetes, heart disease, obstructive sleep apnoea or stroke. Increased weight can also have an impact on your ability to perform safe and effective transfers.

On the other hand, excessive weight loss can place you at increased risk of developing pressure ulcers or indicate poor nutrition or malnutrition.

Monitoring the fluids you drink can help you maintain bladder health. Drink enough water, as recommended by your doctor with your bladder management technique in mind. Sufficient intake of water will help prevent dehydration and help reduce the risk of infections and constipation. Try to minimise the amount of caffeine that you drink and alternate with

water. If you are having a few drinks with friends, you may find it helpful to alternate your drinks with one glass of alcohol, then drinking the same amount of water next.

A healthy diet and fluid intake can also contribute to healthy skin, reducing your risk of developing pressure ulcers.

A balanced diet, in conjunction with exercise and a healthy lifestyle, will contribute to good overall health. If you are uncertain what a balanced diet should consist of, speak to an accredited dietitian. They can be found through your local public hospital, community health centre or through www.daa.asn.au.

Fitness and Exercise

Physical activity has benefits for everyone. Studies have found that due to the changes in body systems after spinal cord injury and the result of generally being less active, there are many secondary health complications that can affect individuals. Some of these include heart disease, diabetes, vascular disease, and bone and joint diseases. You may need to modify the way you do things, but you will still benefit from physical activity. Some benefits include improving your fitness, strength, flexibility, weight maintenance, mental health and sense of wellbeing. Exercising and being involved in physical activity are great ways to improve your mood if you are feeling down. Another benefit is the social



aspect of participating in a fitness activity, and being able to get out and about.

Other exercises you can do to promote your long-term health are passive and active stretching. This can help to prevent contractures that may limit your function, and help to maintain your muscle bulk. Check with your physiotherapist what exercises will suit you.

Standing may also help to maintain muscle bulk and may help with reducing loss in bone density in your lower limbs. Equipment such as tilt tables can help you stand safely with support.

If you are starting physical activity, it is important to check with your GP to determine if there are any activities you should avoid. If it has been a long time since you last stood, you may require a bone density test to determine if it is safe to do so.

Socialising

Staying in contact with friends and family is important for your mental health, even though sometimes you don't feel like seeing people. Studies have shown that people who have a good social network are healthier and cope better than those who see fewer people. Refer to the "Travel, Sport and Leisure" fact sheet in this series for further information.

Smoking

These days, the general public is aware of the effects of smoking on health. After a spinal cord injury, smoking can have additional effects on your body's systems. Depending on the level of your injury, your lung function and capacity may be compromised. Smoking can reduce this already compromised lung function and can lead to other secondary complications.

In addition to affecting your lung health, smoking can also have an impact on the health of your skin.



Smoking can affect the circulation of oxygenated blood reaching your skin and the amount of oxygen in the blood. Studies have found that individuals with a spinal cord injury who smoke are more likely to develop pressure ulcers than those who do not.

If you are able to stop smoking, it will have positive effects for the health of your lungs, your skin, and your general wellbeing. See the resources section for how to find support to assist you to quit smoking.

Stress Management

You may find that, since your spinal cord injury, you are having some difficulties in coping or find yourself getting stressed about dealing with your new circumstances. There are health professionals, such as clinical psychologists, who can help you to learn stress management techniques to better manage your stress. Speak with your health professional or GP to help you link with suitable support in your area.

Alcohol, other drugs and spinal cord injury

Similar to the general population, alcohol and drug use can have significant negative consequences for



both your physical and emotional health. After a spinal cord injury, there are some aspects of your physical health that require more thought, attention and care than previously. Some of these (such as kidney, bladder, bowel and skin health) are closely linked with long and short-term effects of alcohol and drug use.

After a spinal cord injury, reducing the risk of accidents related to drinking is as important as ever. Consuming excessive amounts of alcohol or the use of drugs will result in reduced motor skills, which will inhibit your ability to transfer or be hoisted safely. It can reduce your ability to use your mobility aids and wheelchairs safely, impair wheelchair skills and place you at increased risk of pressure ulcers.

As with the general population, excessive use of alcohol and drugs has been shown to place undue stress on relationships, ability to work, and mental health. If you recognise that you may benefit from discussing how alcohol or drug use is impacting on your life, you can speak to your GP or health professional confidentially about appropriate support available.

References and Further Resources

ParaQuad NSW: www.paraquad.org.au
 (02) 8741 5600
 ParaQuad's Community Support and Wellbeing Service
 (02) 8741 5674

Queensland Spinal Injuries service (QSCIS). Alcohol, Drugs, Spinal Cord Injury and You.

www.health.qld.gov.au/qscis

NSW State Spinal Cord Injury Service Directory of Information and Support www.aci.health.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/155227/sci_directoryweb.pdf

FitAbility Exercise Program, Lidcombe (02) 9351 9615
http://sydney.edu.au/health_sciences/placements/disciplines/exercise_sport_science/fitability.shtml

Burn Rubber Burn, Eastern Suburbs, Campbelltown, Sutherland and Penrith www.pycnsw.org/prime_sparts_burnrubber

Physiotherapy Exercises for People with Spinal Cord Injuries and other Neurological Conditions
www.physiotherapyexercises.com/

Nutrition for Adults with a Spinal Cord Injury
www.aci.health.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/155185/nutrition.pdf

Quitline 137 848 or go to www.icanquit.com.au/

Spinal Outreach Team QSCIS (2008). Physical activity.

Spinal Outreach Team QSCIS (2008). Your Health – Keep it in Check.

Health Maintenance for People with a SCI: Targeting Health Professionals www.aci.health.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/155167/sci_health_maintenance.pdf

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Martin Ginis, KA, Jetha, A, Mack, DE, & Hetz, S (2010). Physical activity and subjective wellbeing among people with a spinal cord injury: A meta analysis, *Spinal Cord*, 48, 65-72.

Nickel, G (2002) Nutrition for adults with a Spinal Cord Injury. Targeting people with Spinal Cord injuries and significant others, Rural Spinal Cord Injury Project.

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