

# Pregnancy and having a baby

This fact sheet is intended to be a resource for those considering pregnancy and parenting, now or in the future. It will discuss issues surrounding pregnancy, preparing for labour and delivery of baby as well as tips for life at home with a newborn.



Is pregnancy and parenting possible after a spinal cord injury? Absolutely!

Regardless of the level of injury and degree of impairment, women with a spinal cord injury are having and raising children.

Most people, spinal cord injury or not, will wonder if they are ready for the emotional, physical and financial responsibilities of

parenthood. Women's bodies' change during pregnancy and these changes will impact on the daily tasks of women with a spinal cord injury. Understanding and preparing yourself for these changes is the key to best managing your pregnancy.

If planning a pregnancy, it is important you talk to your spinal specialist and involve them in the planning phase. Your spinal specialist may be able to help you find an obstetrician and/or midwife who has some experience in and knowledge of spinal cord injury. Discussing your medication early in the planning phase is important, as some medications may not be safe to take during pregnancy and may need to be gradually reduced.

It is likely your pregnancy may be described as "high risk" purely because there are some additional precautions to consider (these will be discussed during this fact sheet). This does not mean, however, that a pregnancy should be avoided.

## Bladder management

As your baby grows there will be more pressure on your bladder, decreasing its capacity. If you use intermittent catheterisation you are likely to have to pass a catheter more regularly. You may even find you need to change to an indwelling catheter towards the later stages of your pregnancy, especially as the size of your stomach will make it more difficult to catheterise. During pregnancy, you are at an increased risk of urinary tract infections (UTIs). UTI prevention is crucial (please refer to the "Your Bladder" fact sheet in this series), as is early treatment. If you have any signs or symptoms of a UTI, see your GP, spinal specialist or obstetrician.

## Bowel management

In terms of changes to your bowel routine, the most common issue during pregnancy appears to be constipation. Ask your obstetrician or spinal specialist to recommend pregnancy diet supplements such as magnesium. Slight changes to your diet may be required, such as increasing your fibre intake.

## Blood flow

In the last months of your pregnancy, pressure from your growing baby may hinder the flow of blood to your legs and you may notice swelling around your legs and feet. It is important you change positions during the course of the day to help keep blood moving around your body. This can be done by spending a period of time in the middle of the day lying down or standing (if possible) and having somebody assist you with passive range of movement exercises. It is important that you consult your spinal specialist or obstetrician about what strategies will be best for you considering your personal health circumstances. They may also recommend wearing pressure stockings to help improve blood flow and reduce swelling.

## Weight gain

This is an inevitable part of pregnancy, but it may mean that moving around and carrying out daily tasks becomes more difficult. Every pregnant woman will



have a different experience with this. You may need to reduce the number of transfers you complete, have increased help around the home, or temporarily use a power wheelchair or hoist during the later stages of pregnancy.

### **Autonomic dysreflexia**

Please refer to the “Autonomic Dysreflexia” fact sheet in this series to see if this issue will relate to you – AD will only be an issue if your level of spinal cord injury is at T6 or above. During pregnancy, you will need to be very clear on the management of AD. This is because you will be at higher risk of AD due to the effects of pregnancy on your bladder, bowel and skin. Ensure your obstetrician/midwife is aware of AD and how to manage it as it is possible for symptoms of AD to be misdiagnosed. Some pregnancy-related conditions such as pre-eclampsia can have similar symptoms.

### **Skin management**

Because of weight gain and postural changes, it is important you take special care in the prevention of pressure sores. You may need to explore another way to complete regular pressure relief, such as leaning side-to-side against furniture or returning to bed. Invest in a long-handled mirror early, as it will be important you keep checking your skin twice a day during the full length of your pregnancy.

If you notice changes to your posture when sitting in your wheelchair, contact your spinal unit or team to ask for a review by an occupational therapist or physiotherapist. They may suggest changes to your wheelchair to make it more comfortable for you and your baby or suggest changing your wheelchair cushion.

Changes to other pieces of your equipment, such as your mattress and commode, may also be necessary in the later stages of pregnancy. Contact your occupational therapist or physiotherapist to discuss your options, as you may be able to borrow or hire the equipment recommended to you.

### **Labour**

You may or may not notice signs of labour so it is important you and your obstetrician/midwife recognise signs of labour by feeling for contractions around the abdomen. If your injury is T6 and above, you need to be aware of the onset of autonomic dysreflexia. It may be suggested that an epidural anaesthetic is the best way of preventing AD.

A birthing plan will be discussed during your pregnancy which will outline your preferred delivery

option. Your delivery may be natural, but if you are unable to push during labour the use of forceps or a vacuum device will be discussed.

On the arrival of your baby, it is impossible to tell you everything to expect as each person will have a different experience. The following are some common issues that, if considered and discussed prior to your baby's birth, may make it less overwhelming when it is time to return home.

### **Breastfeeding**

If you are able to breastfeed, it is worth considering a triangular pillow or cushion to support your baby. This will help to reduce strain around your upper body joints.

### **Handling your baby**

This may be difficult if you have tetraplegia or for any parent using a wheelchair when you need to move from A to B.

There are a wide range of baby slings and prams on the market. Consideration should be given to their ease of use and the position of your baby. TAD Disability Services (TAD) makes modifications to prams, and the Independent Living Centre NSW (ILC NSW) has a buyer guide for baby slings, which may be useful. Refer to the resources section at the end of this fact sheet.

It may be beneficial to contact your occupational therapist or physiotherapist to consider other aspects of handling your baby such as safely moving your baby in and out of your car.

### **Using the cot**

Unfortunately, cots are not generally accessible for parents who use a wheelchair. You may be able to find a cot on the market that has clear access underneath and sides that can be removed low enough for you to reach in towards your baby. Again, TAD can do modifications for wheelchair access to cots. Contact the organisation early to ensure this work is done before the birth.

### **Bathing your baby**

This is often discussed as being one of the more challenging issues for parents with a spinal cord injury, given the introduction of water and small bathroom spaces. But, it is certainly not impossible. Utilise as much help as you can with this, so you have more time and energy for your baby. While your baby is still small enough for a portable baby bath, it may be easiest to place the bath on a low table. When your baby is older, temporary modifications can be made to your regular

bath to allow the baby to sit supported. Again, TAD may be able to help you with this.

### Dressing/changing your baby

Change tables with clear access are more readily available. Large companies such as your local baby store or IKEA stock accessible and wall-mounted change tables. The addition of loops or Velcro to your baby's nappies and clothes may help with dressing and undressing.

### Other baby equipment

The other items your baby will need include a high chair, a car seat and play equipment. At times you may find you are unable to modify some equipment, especially safety equipment, as it is protected by the relevant Australian Standards. Adapting the way you undertake tasks, by talking with other parents in a similar situation or with health care professionals, may provide suggestions for new ways of doing things. Refer to the resources section for more information.

### Postnatal depression and anxiety

Having a baby can be one of the most significant and happiest events in a woman's life. While life with a new baby can be exciting and rewarding, it can also be a difficult, overwhelming and stressful time.

If you are experiencing any distressing symptoms, such as feeling tearful most of the time, feeling hopeless or helpless, not wanting to go out or see friends and family, talk to someone. Your doctor, midwife, or child and family health nurse can provide you with assistance or arrange for you to see a psychologist or psychiatrist. It may also help you to talk to other mothers who have a spinal cord injury.

### References and Further Resources

**Royal North Shore Hospital** (02) 9926 7111

- Spinal Unit (ask for your spinal specialist)
- Maternity Unit inquiries
- Assistive Technology and Seating Service for services to review your wheelchair and seating

**Prince of Wales Hospital** (02) 9382 2222

- Spinal Unit (ask for your spinal specialist)
- Maternity Unit inquiries
- Assistive Technology and Seating Service for services to review your wheelchair and seating

How to find a Midwife:

- Contact your closest hospital for a list of the midwives it employs
- Contact Pregnancy Birth and Beyond [www.pregnancy.com.au](http://www.pregnancy.com.au) (02) 9873 1750

How to find an Obstetrician:

- Contact your closest hospital for a list of the obstetricians it employs
- Contact The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists [www.ranzcog.edu.au/find/index.shtm](http://www.ranzcog.edu.au/find/index.shtm) (03) 9417 1699

ParaQuad NSW: [www.paraquad.org.au](http://www.paraquad.org.au)  
(02) 8741 5600

ParaQuad's Community Support and Wellbeing Service  
(02) 8741 5674

TAD Disability Services will help custom build and modify equipment to meet your and your baby's needs  
[www.tadnsw.org.au](http://www.tadnsw.org.au) (02) 9912 3400

Independent Living Centre NSW is an information and advisory centre for adaptive equipment [www.ilcnsw.asn.au](http://www.ilcnsw.asn.au) 1300 885 886

LittleBear has a range of accessible bathing products.  
[www.littlebear.com.au](http://www.littlebear.com.au) 1300 553 360

Consumer advocate "Choice" has an online method to compare a wide range of equipment, including high chairs, baby slings and car seats [www.choice.com.au](http://www.choice.com.au)

ParaParents is a NSW peer support group for parents who have a disability 0403 588 888

Spinal Cord Injuries Australia has a peer support program [www.scia.org.au](http://www.scia.org.au) (02) 8374 3010

Disability, Pregnancy and Parenting International is a UK-based organisation that promotes awareness and support for disabled people during pregnancy and as parents [www.dppi.org.uk](http://www.dppi.org.uk)

Through the Looking Glass is a US organisation for parents with a disability [www.lookingglass.org](http://www.lookingglass.org)

Parents with Disabilities Online is another US organisation that provides support for parents with a disability [www.disabledparents.net](http://www.disabledparents.net)

Ethans, K (2002) Pregnancy in Women with Spinal Cord Injury, CPA Newsletter Paratracks [www.cpamanitoba.ca/pdf/paratracks/2002\\_june\\_paratracks\\_en.pdf](http://www.cpamanitoba.ca/pdf/paratracks/2002_june_paratracks_en.pdf)

Spinal cord injury information network, Pregnancy for Women with SCI – InfoSheet #14 [www.spinalcord.uab.edu/show.asp?durki=22442](http://www.spinalcord.uab.edu/show.asp?durki=22442)