

Spasm and pain

Individuals with a spinal cord injury commonly experience chronic pain and spasm. Pain and spasm can impact on your day-to-day life. Despite this, it is possible to find strategies and treatments, in consultation with your health professional, to best manage your pain and spasm and reduce their impact on your lifestyle.

Spasms

Spasms are involuntary, reflex movements of your body that can occur after spinal cord injury. The messages from your brain that are usually sent down the spinal cord to control these reflex movements are interrupted at the level of your injury. The result of this is that the limbs move in a jerky and uncoordinated manner.

Spasms can occur from stimulation below the level of injury. This can include touch, pressure, movement or pain. Spasms can occur at any time of the day, but are usually worse in the mornings.

Spasms can be worse if you have an existing pressure ulcer, or a bladder, kidney or other infection. Worsening spasms can be a warning sign that something may be wrong. If you are experiencing worsening spasms, talk to your GP or spinal specialist.

There can be benefits to spasms. They can help to maintain muscle bulk, help you to perform some functional tasks, decrease swelling in limbs and increase circulation. If spasms are affecting your lifestyle, it is possible for them to be reduced with medication.

Pain

There are different types of pain that people with spinal cord injury experience, and different types of pain will require different sorts of treatment. There are two commonly experienced types of pain.

- Neuropathic pain is a common type of pain experienced by individuals with a spinal cord injury.

It usually occurs at or below the level of spinal cord injury and is generally caused by abnormal signals from the nerves that have been damaged by your injury. You may feel pain in areas of your body that have reduced or no sensation, which is often due to these abnormal nerve signals. The pain is often described as a “sharp, burning, stinging or shooting” pain. It can be difficult to get rid of this pain completely using medical or other interventions, but self-management strategies can be helpful.

- Musculo-skeletal pain occurs from damage to your muscles, bones or joints. It may occur from wear and tear because of overuse, arthritic changes, muscle imbalance and postural changes. This type of pain is usually felt above the level of injury or where you have sensation. Musculo-skeletal pain is usually felt close to where the damage has occurred.

How can pain be managed?

Pain can be difficult to manage, and may require you to try a few different treatment options to find out what works best for you. As with many things, everyone is

different and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to managing pain.

The most effective management of neuropathic pain will involve a combined approach involving physiotherapy, counselling or other treatments,



instead of medications alone. Often a combination of medications will be explored to see what works best for you.

Medications often have side effects that may impact on other areas of your life. It is important to talk about these side effects with your prescriber and consider what is best for you. It is rare for medications to completely eradicate pain.

Alternative treatments such as acupuncture, relaxation and meditation are being investigated as options. Before seeking alternative treatments, it is important you discuss your circumstances with your doctor, as there may be some conditions that make alternative therapies inadvisable.

Musculo-skeletal pain often responds well to physical treatments such as massage, hot or cold packs and strengthening and stretching exercises. Your pain may be due to overuse of your joints and muscles or changes in your posture. A review with an occupational therapist or physiotherapist can help you determine if you need to change the way you perform some tasks or if you need some new equipment.

Psychological treatments are becoming more popular to assist individuals with chronic pain. A common form of this is called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which can help you develop strategies to deal with your pain more effectively and minimise the impact it has on your everyday life.

A healthy lifestyle, incorporating a balanced diet and regular physical activity, can help to maintain your health and wellbeing. Taking care of your emotional and physical health, and staying active, can assist in reducing some of the effects of pain.

It is possible that spasticity, urinary tract infections, bowel complications and pressure ulcers can impact on the amount of pain you experience. If this is the case, contact your GP or treating team to discuss appropriate management of these issues.

References and Further Resources

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

The Queensland Spinal Cord Injuries service (2009)

Spasms and spasticity following Spinal Cord Injury
www.health.qld.gov.au/qscis

Pain management following Spinal Cord Injury
www.health.qld.gov.au/qscis

Northwest Regional Spinal Cord Injury System (2005).

Staying healthy after a Spinal Cord Injury: Pain after Spinal Cord Injury http://sci.washington.edu/info/pamphlets/pain_brochure.pdf

Spinal Cord Injury information network (2001)

Pain after a Spinal Cord Injury
www.spinalcord.uab.edu/show.asp?durki=41119

Reeve Foundation's Paralysis Resource Centre
www.christopherreeve.org/site/c.mtKZKgMWKwG/b.4453419/k.3757/Spasticity.htm#

Apparelyzed: Spasticity and Muscle Spasms.
www.apparelyzed.com/spasticity.html

Kennedy, P, Sherlock, O, McClelland, M, Short, D, Boyle, J & Wilson, C (2010). A multi-centre study of the community needs of people with spinal cord injuries: The first 18 months. *Spinal Cord* (48), 15-20.