

# Your bladder

This fact sheet outlines some information on ways of managing an important function of your body after a spinal cord injury. Maintaining an effective bladder management system can take some of the stress out of participating in more enjoyable aspects of your life.

Discussion on ways of managing your bladder will begin with your Spinal Rehabilitation Specialist soon after injury and continue throughout your life. No matter which bladder management technique you use, annual medical review (for example with a spinal specialist, urologist or GP) is required.

## How does the bladder normally work?

The kidneys produce waste products from our blood in the form of urine, which is transported to the bladder via the ureters. When that bladder capacity reaches a certain level, a message is sent via the spinal cord to the brain. If it is an appropriate time to urinate, the message sent back from the brain to the bladder will be contraction of the bladder and relaxation of the bladder neck sphincter.

## How does spinal cord injury affect the bladder?

After a spinal cord injury, the messages from the bladder to the brain are generally interrupted. Your rehabilitation team will work with you to establish a new bladder management program. The type of program developed for you will consider your level of spinal cord injury and your lifestyle choices.

## What are the main types of bladder management?

The method of bladder management you use should be practical, reliable and suited to your lifestyle. Factors that will influence your bladder management method include your level of injury, hand function and

ability to hold a catheter, whether you can transfer onto a toilet, your bladder type, your age and personal preference. Main types include:

- Indwelling catheter (IDC)
- Suprapubic catheter (SPC)
- Clean Intermittent self-catheter (CISC)

## How can I keep my urinary system healthy?

The main purpose of all bladder management is to keep the urinary system healthy and protect the kidneys from damage. Important ways you can contribute to a healthy urinary system include:

- Empty the bladder regularly and making sure there is as little urine as possible left in the bladder to help reduce urinary tract infections
- Avoid over distension of the bladder (this may be caused by excess urine increasing the size of your bladder)
- Maintain good personal hygiene and skin care, and wash your hands before and after bladder care to prevent the spread of germs
- Be aware of the signs and symptoms of an infection
- Take your bladder medication as prescribed by your doctor or specialist
- Use an appropriate catheter for your needs based on the advice from your health care professional

## Other tips

- Drink sufficient amounts of water, as appropriate to your bladder management program
- Attend yearly renal tract testing (blood, urine and imaging)
- Follow recommended guidelines for the care and maintenance of your bladder management equipment, for example, change catheters and leg bags as recommended

## What symptoms of a urinary tract infection (UTI) may I notice?

You may notice one or some of the following symptoms. You do not need to experience all of these symptoms to have a UTI:

- Fever
- Generally feeling unwell
- Increased spasms
- Increased neuropathic or nerve pain
- Pain or discomfort when passing urine
- Leaking of urine
- Sweating
- Shivering
- Experiencing autonomic dysreflexia
- Offensive smelling urine\*
- Cloudy urine, or urine containing blood or debris\*

\* Some people can experience the last two symptoms without necessarily having a UTI.

## What should I do if I think I have a UTI?

- See your GP or local doctor who may take a urine specimen or order a urine test
- Change indwelling catheters (IDC or SPC) otherwise bacteria may re-emerge after antibiotics are finished and a UTI can recur
- Drink plenty of water. If you increase your fluid intake, remember to pass a catheter more frequently or drain your leg bag more often
- Take antibiotics only as prescribed by your doctor, making sure that your urine has been tested first so that you are taking the correct antibiotic
- Check your skin more regularly, as you may be more susceptible to pressure ulcers when sick or if you have leaked any urine
- If you are using a registered reusable catheter, start with a new catheter

## What financial assistance is available to help me manage my bladder?

People with a spinal cord injury are eligible for financial assistance from the Federal Government for their continence needs. This comes in the form of the Continence Aids Payment Scheme (CAPS). Your continence adviser or spinal nurse may give tips and recommendations on how to safely manage your allocation of funds under this scheme.

State Government assistance may also be available. Enable NSW was established in 2007 and now administers the Program of Appliances for Disabled People (PADP). A continence adviser can submit applications on your behalf to Enable NSW to cover equipment costs not met by CAPS. This assistance will require some financial co-contribution and is means tested.

Government support services can change regularly, so for the most up-to-date information please inquire directly with that service, or speak to your health care professional.

## Difficulties managing your bladder

In some cases, getting a good bladder routine organised can be difficult. You may experience occasional bladder accidents or associated autonomic dysreflexia. You may find these problems make you concerned about going out or doing some activities. As a result, you may find you avoid doing things you want to do. If you are experiencing any problems with your bladder management, speak to your health professional about how they can be overcome so you can continue doing the things you want.

## References and Further Resources

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

BrightSky Australia for product and clinical services  
[www.brightsky.com.au](http://www.brightsky.com.au) 1300 886 601

National Continence Helpline  
[www.continence.org.au](http://www.continence.org.au) 1800 330 066

State Spinal Outreach Service (SOS)/Rural Spinal Cord Injury Service (02) 9808 9666

Your local doctor, spinal specialist or urologist

Your community or continence nurse

Fact sheets for health professionals are available on  
[www.paraquad.org.au](http://www.paraquad.org.au)

Spinal cord injury rehabilitation evidence at  
[www.scireproject.com](http://www.scireproject.com)

Consumer guide on bladder management at  
[www.pva.org](http://www.pva.org)