

# Breast Awareness for women with Spinal Cord Injury





Slater and Gordon Lawyers are one of the country's leading claimant personal injury law firms, recovering millions of pounds worth of compensation for accident victims every year. We are experts in securing the maximum amount of spinal cord injury compensation and getting rehabilitation support as quickly as possible.

Slater and Gordon Lawyers understand the sudden change in lifestyle caused by an injury to the spinal cord and the immediate strain this places on finances. That is why with Slater and Gordon Lawyers on your side, a No Win, No Fee (Conditional Fee) agreement can enable you to get the support and financial compensation you need to live with a spinal cord injury, not only in the short term, but also to provide for your future needs.

Every spinal cord injury claim is different and the amount of compensation paid will vary from case to case. We will however give you an accurate indication at the earliest stage as to how much compensation you could expect to receive, to help you plan for your future.

Slater and Gordon Lawyers have a specialist team dedicated to pursuing compensation claims on behalf of those who sustain spinal cord injury in all types of accident, be it a road traffic collision, an accident in the workplace or whilst on holiday or travelling in a foreign country. Our expert solicitors provide total support for our clients, particularly at times when they may feel at their most vulnerable. We approach each case with understanding and sensitivity.

Where possible, we will seek to secure an interim payment of compensation to relieve financial pressures and cover immediate expenses. We can also provide advice on long-term financial planning and rehabilitation.

Contact Slater and Gordon Lawyers for a free consultation. We will be happy to help you. Freephone [0808 175 8105](tel:08081758105) or visit our website at [www.slaterandgordon.co.uk](http://www.slaterandgordon.co.uk)

Slater and Gordon Lawyers are proud to be a Diamond Corporate Sponsor of the Spinal Injuries Association and a wider supporter of their services. By supporting the SIA, we understand the need to raise money which will go towards funding SIA's key services such as their Advice Line, website and peer support in the spinal injury centres, hospitals and wider community.

## WHAT IS SIA?

SIA is the national charity for people with spinal cord injuries and their families. If you, a relative or friend is paraplegic or tetraplegic, or you are interested in our work, why not join us? Membership is free of charge and all new UK members will receive a year's free subscription to SIA's bi-monthly magazine *Forward*. An annual subscription to *Forward* is £20.00.

We also circulate a bi-monthly email newsletter, 'e-clips' to all who subscribe while our popular interactive website offers Chat Rooms and a Message Board as well as hundreds of pages of useful information.

We produce a wide range of publications (available to purchase) which deal with all aspects of living with spinal cord injury, e.g. books on bowel and bladder management, sexuality, publications for health care professionals, as well as sports opportunities. We also have an extensive series of Factsheets on a wide range of topics, and, for those pursuing a compensation claim; we publish a Directory of Personal Injury Solicitors.

Our Freephone Advice Line is accessible by e-mail, fax, post and telephone and provides accurate and up-to-date information on subjects including welfare advice, specialist equipment, legal rights etc as well as health related topics. We run a Vocational Support service for those wishing to return to employment, retrain or take up volunteering. Our Health and Ageing projects both work to improve the quality of life of spinal cord injured people and can be accessed via the Advice Line. Externally, our Outreach Service, staffed by spinal cord injured people, operates at all ten Spinal Injuries Centres in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as out in the community, on a regional basis.

SIA also actively campaigns on vital issues affecting the everyday lives of disabled people, as set out in our campaigns manifesto. We are represented on major voluntary and statutory bodies and our own Governing Board is composed of spinal cord injured people. We have our own state-of-the-art premises, SIA House, which combines the twin principles of inclusive design and accessibility and from here we run the only specialist spinal cord injury Library in the country.

To find out more, or join us, please write to us at:

Spinal Injuries Association, SIA House, 2 Trueman Place, Oldbrook, Milton Keynes MK6 2HH or contact us on:

Tel: 0845 678 6633 (General Office – 9-5)  
0800 980 0501 (Freephone Advice Line (9.30-1pm&2pm– 4.30pm))  
Fax 0845 070 69211  
Website: [www.spinal.co.uk](http://www.spinal.co.uk)  
E-mail: [sia@spinal.co.uk](mailto:sia@spinal.co.uk)

SIA Registered Charity Number: 1054097

## Breast Awareness for Women with Spinal Cord Injury

Breast awareness means getting to know what is normal for you. Breast tissue varies from woman to woman. Some women have naturally 'lumpy' breasts often making self-examination confusing.

It is very easy to forget to carry out a monthly check for breast lumps but unfortunately having a spinal cord injury does not mean breast cancer will not occur.

### The breast awareness five point code

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1. Know what is normal for you
  2. Look and feel
  3. Know what changes to look and feel for
  4. Report any changes without delay
  5. Attend for routine screening if aged 50 and over.

For women with paralysis, self examination can be more challenging. Sadly, women with disabilities often have less access to breast health services than any other groups of women. BUT: Disabled women have the same rights of access to breast screening as other women.

### Screening

In the UK women are invited for breast screening from the age of 50 to 70 years of age every 3 years. You may not receive a letter immediately after your 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, in reality the first invitation letter can arrive any time between your 50<sup>th</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> birthday. If you have any worries you should contact your GP Surgery to make sure your name is on the appropriate mailing list. Of course you don't have to be restricted to the 50-70 years recall system. If you have concerns at any age you can ask your GP to refer you for mammography.

### Self-help

Some studies suggest that SCI women don't present for health screening as often as non-SCI women. But don't let obstacles get in the way and in the process compromise your health. NHS Staff with little understanding of SCI can affect the way you view screening in the future. Comments from a health professional such as *"OK, Elizabeth, we're going to go into the exam room now. Can you stand?"* are very upsetting.

### Monthly self examination

Many breast lumps are detected by women themselves. But feeling for lumps forms one part of breast examination, looking carefully at your breasts in a mirror is also vital. For SCI women poor posture may make this difficult and a mirror needs to be the correct height for you in your wheelchair. You are looking for any change in size, shape of the breasts, discharge from the nipple or puckering of the nipple. Also, skin changes e.g. rashes or orange peel appearance. Always check the armpit area for swelling or lumps.

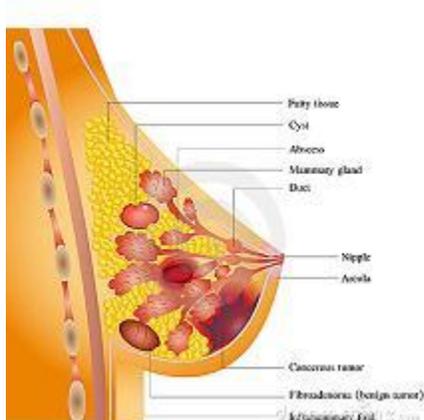
The best time to self-examine is between 4 to 7 days after your period, or on the same day each month if your periods have stopped.

If you are unable to self-examine because of limited movement or problems with spasms:

- Ask husbands / partners / PAs to help you
- Ask your GP when you go to the surgery / ask to see a female GP if you wish.

### Normal Changes

Along with the rest of the body, your breasts change through the decades. Breast tissue is made up mainly of fibrous, fatty tissue plus tissue that makes up the milk-producing glands (glandular tissue). There is no muscle tissue in breasts.



During our 30's and 40', the hormone oestrogen helps keep breasts firm. Problems during these years tend to be of a benign (non-cancerous) nature. Cysts (fluid filled sacs) can occur and these may cause varying degrees of pain. If cysts reoccur regularly they can be drained or surgically removed.

Another painful condition is caused by rubbery benign lumps called fibro-adenomas. They too can be surgically removed if troublesome.

Pain can also occur around the time of menstruation.

Some sagging may occur after pregnancy / breastfeeding as breasts shrink back to their normal size.

As we age, the fatty tissue reduces, this is a contributory factor to lack of firmness. Equally, ageing skin naturally loses its elasticity.

In your 30's and 40's the fatty tissue, which is dense, makes lumps / breast cancers more difficult to detect on mammogram. The risk of breast cancers during one's 30's is low, but any persistent problems, should be checked by your GP.

In your 40's, you are more likely to notice that the shape of your breast is changing.

In your 50's, breasts naturally shrink. Hormonal changes affect the glandular tissue – breasts also appear less firm.

In your 20's, 30's and 40's, you may experience lumps around the time of your period, which then go away. But feeling a new lump when you are post-menopausal, should alert you to seek a medical opinion.

### Mammogram



Mammography is a procedure which is technically difficult and which requires a high degree of co-operation between the mammography practitioner and the woman. The woman has to be carefully positioned on the X-ray machine, and must be able to hold the position for several seconds. This may not be possible for women with limited mobility in their upper bodies or who are unable to support their upper bodies unaided.

If a woman has a physical disability, or is a wheelchair user, then the breast screening unit should advise on whether breast screening is technically possible and where would be the most appropriate place for her to be screened. This will usually be at a static unit. If a mammogram is not technically possible, the woman should still remain in the call and recall programme, as any increased mobility at a future date may make screening easier. There is no alternative to screening by mammography. If a woman cannot be screened she should be advised on breast awareness.

<http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk/breast-cancer-breast-health/breast-awareness/?qclid=CNarqbqz7KkCFcVO4QodGTFMVw>

Helpline : Tel: 0808 800 6000

Taken from Equal Access to Breast and Cervical Screening for Disabled Women – Cancer Screening Series No 2 – March 2006.

### **Tip when attending for Mammogram**

- Contact your local hospital to see what facilities are available and what, if any, specific arrangements they would like you to make
- Inform staff of your specific needs for example, assistance getting onto table, adjustable bed, staying in your wheelchair
- Find out the access to NHS buildings / screening unit
- Ask for a double appointment
- Take someone with you
- Ask for two radiographers to be present to assist with positioning if you are unable to take someone with you who could assist you
- Ask if a seated mammogram is possible – some departments offer this
- Ask if your mammogram can be performed lying down if that suits you best
- What about your Spinal Cord Injury Centre? Do they offer mammograms, or physical examination
- If you stay in your wheelchair, remove the footplates, as this will allow you to get close to the X-ray machine. You may also need to move forward for easy access and positioning.

*One member reported that at her first mammogram, she was transferred on to a chair but felt that she was man-handled in the process.*

Some women will have problems with positioning and balancing and this is where expert assistance, from a PA , partner or professional will make a tremendous difference. The procedure may bring on spasms or pain in some women.

If you are concerned about side effects from a mammogram, to put it in perspective, a mammogram emits a very low dose of radiation, about the equivalent of flying from London to Australia and back.

## **Breast Cancer**

### **Are you are at risk of Breast Cancer?**

Having a SCI probably does not increase your risk of developing breast cancer but some of the consequences of SCI may delay or prevent early detection. But, bear in mind that 80% of breast lumps are benign (non cancerous).

**What increases the risk of breast cancer?**

- Close family member having breast cancer, mother, sister
- Obesity, particularly if you eat a diet high in fat
- High alcohol consumption
- Non-childbearing
- Age – the risk of breast cancer increases with age

Additional risk factors for SCI women:

- lack of sensation
- lack of dexterity making self examination difficult / impossible
- sedentary lifestyle
- posture changes
- not having access to mobile screening
- difficulty accessing buildings and x-ray machines
- lack of understanding of SCI by NHS staff.

SIA member Liz : *“I think being a complete tetra has definitely meant that it has been detected quite late”.*

Investigations and treatment for breast cancer can be a positive experience – *“...the treatment was very good, talking to staff to make them aware of my needs was no problem. The staff were approachable, kind and the care was excellent”.*

**Useful website links**

<http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/breastscreen/>

<http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/publications/cs2.pdf>

**Sources**

This fact sheet was produced by the SIA Advice Line with information from the following resources:

Equal Access to Breast and Cervical Screening for Disabled Women – Cancer Screening Series No 2 – March 2006

- [www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk](http://www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk)
- [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)
- <http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org/>

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