

Steps to Ageing Well

Step 3: Care of the Bladder



Ageing Well with a Spinal Cord Injury

Introduction

The information contained in the Steps to Ageing Well Series is designed to help spinal cord injured (SCI) people consider the possible effects of ageing; tips on how to prevent those effects; and suggestions on managing the problems as they arise.

In addition to the information and helpful hints, comments have been offered by SIA members who have lived many years with SCI.

There are numerous definitions of ageing, here is an example:

Physiological ageing may be defined as “the gradual, natural deterioration and decay of cells and their replacement over time” and old age as “the point at which cell deterioration, damage and death outstrips the body’s capacity for recovery, repair and growth”.

One of the issues faced is the increased need for assistance with daily activities. Fatigue and weakness are reasons people ask for additional help especially with such areas as transferring, toileting and dressing.

In parallel, partners/carers may well be experiencing the effects of ageing themselves and therefore may not be able to offer the same level of assistance as previously.

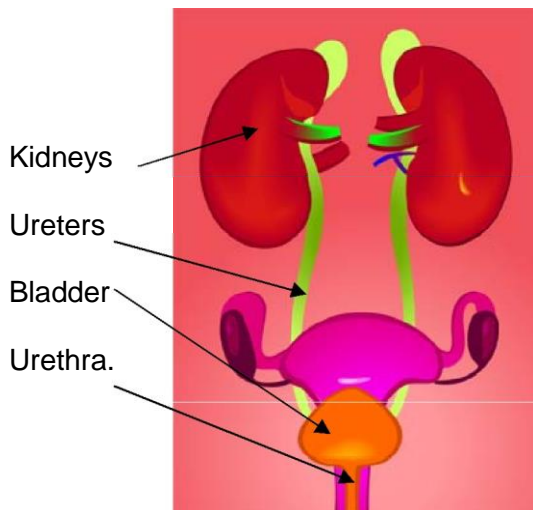
Ageing can start earlier in SCI people and the length of time since injury is a major contributing factor. There are many ways to approach the inevitable effects of ageing with some schools of thought even suggesting one should “attribute nothing to age”. But by being realistic and prepared, the journey can be a comfortable one. A high percentage (64%) of SCI people rate their quality of life as good right up to the latter stage of their lives.



THE BLADDER

1. The Urinary System

The urinary system consists of:



The kidneys work 24 hours a day filtering the blood that passes through them to get rid of waste products, thus producing urine. The urine is then stored in the bladder.

2. The Ageing Bladder

The ageing bladder loses its tone and the lining becomes thinner. Because the bladder may not empty completely there is an increased risk of developing urinary tract infections (UTI's). The ageing bladder's ability to store urine is reduced and therefore you may have to adjust your routine to more frequent emptying or change to a different bladder management system.

Bladder issues were reported as one of the top three health priorities In the Ageing Well Survey, 2007.

Urinary Tract Infections

One of the most common reasons for seeking medical advice and readmissions to hospital is due to UTI's. UTI's not only cause unpleasant symptoms which require antibiotics and increase the risk of serious complications but can also affect your social / work life.

39% of respondents reported an increase in UTI's over the last 10 years. (Ageing Well Survey, 2007)

3. What you can do to help prevent UTI's?

Eating and drinking for a healthy bladder

- 🕒 Everyday foods and drinks can affect the pH balance of your urine (acidic versus alkaline balance). Ideally urine should be slightly acidic – this helps prevent

infections and formation of stones both in the kidneys and the bladder.

- 🕒 Eating citrus fruit and drinking juices such as cranberry can help to keep urine acid.
- 🕒 Research demonstrates that chemicals found in cranberry juice alter the activity of certain bacteria by preventing them sticking to the lining of the bladder.

Good technique?

- 🕒 Cleanliness is crucial. Hand washing (you / your carer) is essential to help avoid infections.
- 🕒 Keep all equipment to be used for bladder management clean and away from dirty areas. The area around a supra-pubic catheter should be kept clean and dry.
- 🕒 Emptying the bladder properly is important – residual urine (urine that remains in the bladder after catheterisation / emptying), can become infected.
- 🕒 If you use an indwelling catheter, make sure the balloon is not too big as this can prevent the bladder from emptying properly.

4. Is leakage a problem for you?



Leakage can be due to many problems including:

- 🕒 the ageing bladder
- 🕒 a urinary tract infection
- 🕒 bladder spasms

The treatment options available today include conservative treatment with medication or various surgical procedures. Options suitable for you should be discussed with your SCI Consultant. It may be reassuring to speak to someone who has undergone a procedure before you decide to go ahead.

5. You may need to think about changing your bladder routine

43% of respondents reported increasing problems with their bladder routine over the past 10 years. (Ageing Well Survey, 2007)

- 🕒 What worked 10 years ago may not work so well now. A change of lifestyle may prompt you to change your bladder regime.

- ⌚ Supra-pubic catheterisation is becoming more popular and certainly has some key advantages.

Reflux of Urine

Reflux is when urine flows back up to the kidneys. This can cause infection to spread to your kidneys and over time may cause permanent damage.

Reflux of urine would be one of the main reasons for changing your bladder management routine.

If you suffer from reflux of urine you may experience a swollen abdomen, feelings of nausea and possibly raised blood pressure. UTI's can also increase the risk of reflux. Having regular urological check-ups will pick up on conditions such as reflux of urine.

If you are diagnosed with reflux of urine, it is important not to overfill / overstretch the bladder and ensure that the bladder is emptied properly.

6. Other bladder problems to watch out for:

- ⌚ Prostate enlargement can restrict the flow of urine. This increases the risk of UTI's and you may experience difficulty with catheterisation.
- ⌚ Stones or calculi can develop in the bladder and kidneys. To help prevent stone formation:
 - Drink sufficient fluids
 - Keep your urine slightly acidic
 - Exercise and/or stand regularly.
- ⌚ Bladder cancer: ***report any suspicious signs such as passing blood in the urine as soon as possible.***

Check ups: Have regular checks ups of your bladder and kidneys. If you haven't received an appointment from your SCI Centre, give them a ring to remind them.

7. Who can help with your continence problems?

- ⌚ Your Spinal Cord Injury Centre – discuss any concerns, signs or symptoms at your annual check up.
- ⌚ Your GP Practice (has your GP got a copy of the book *Managing Spinal Cord Injury: Continuing Care* on their shelves?). They can purchase from SIA's Online Shop www.spinal.co.uk
- ⌚ Most Primary Care Trusts employ a Continence Specialist Nurse. You can request a referral if you want to discuss bladder management issues.
- ⌚ The Bladder and Bowel Foundation – Tel: 01536 533255 or the website address <http://www.bladderandbowelfoundation.org/>
- ⌚ For detailed information please see the SIA fact sheet *Bladder Management*. [You can download this from the website](#)

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