

# Steps to Ageing Well

## Step 5: Nutrition



## 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 monthly email newsletter, 'e-clips' to all who subscribe while our popular interactive website offers 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



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.

# 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.



## Nutrition

### Nutrition and its relationship to Ageing with a SCI

#### Ageing

A vital part of ageing well is eating well and maintaining a healthy weight. Food is our body's fuel. As well as sustaining life, food has a role in preventing or managing many lifestyle diseases such as high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes and certain types of cancer. Food also helps the body to fight infection and aids healing. Equally important, food plays a central role in many social activities and gives us great pleasure!



As we age calorie (energy) requirements fall. SCI people already have lower calorie requirements than the non-disabled population and tetraplegics need less energy (calories) than paraplegics due to lower muscle mass.

However, eating less food means that that the focus should be on the quality of that food. Quality rather than quantity is the key here.

*In the SIA Ageing Well Survey 2007, respondents cited weight control as their 4<sup>th</sup> most important concern after bowel, bladder and skin care issues.*

### We all need to eat a variety of good quality food

Including foods from the following groups will help us to eat what our bodies need each day

- **Protein foods** – Protein is essential for tissue repair, fighting illness and disease, carrying nutrients through the body and producing hormones to name just a few roles. High quality sources of protein include lean meat, chicken and fish, eggs, dried beans, and nuts.
- **Fruit and vegetables** – Provide us with several essential vitamins and minerals, fibre and also beneficial substances called phytochemicals. A minimum of 5 portions per day is recommended to ensure adequate daily intake of these essential nutrients.

*10.5% of survey participants never achieve 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day*

- **Dairy products** are rich in calcium which helps to maintain bone density. The aim is for 3 serves a day.

*Most respondents in the survey never achieve 3 serves of dairy a day – 77%.*

- **Breads and cereals** - Wholegrain or fortified varieties are rich in B vitamins and fibre. Assists nerve function and blood production
- **Fluid** – Drink sufficient for your needs (more than 2 litres a day unless medical restrictions apply). Base your fluid intake around water but you can count other types of beverages in your fluid intake for the day.
- **Fibre** – Both soluble fibre from fruit and vegetables and insoluble fibre from pasta, rice, wholemeal bread are necessary to a balanced diet. The right amount of the right fibre is important to establish and maintain stool consistency, aiding bowel management.

## How ageing may affect your food intake

### **Taste**

With advancing years we have fewer taste buds and may lose our natural ability to taste food, which in turn affects our enjoyment. We may be tempted to add more salt and sugar! Experiment with herbs and spices instead.

### **Dentition**

Enjoyment of food may be affected by the need to wear dentures and poorly fitting dentures make food hard to chew. Swallowing difficulties may also influence and restrict the type of food you can eat.

### **Dexterity**

This may already be a problem or become a more of a problem over time and you may have difficulty cutting up your food and feel reluctant to ask for help. There are many aids on the market for assisting with food preparation, eating and drinking.

**Mobility** – can decrease with age and food shopping may become increasingly difficult.

Make use of one of the food companies who deliver ready made meals to your door. If you have problems cooking, you can apply for Meals on Wheels through your local authority. There is a small charge for this service but you can pay in a variety of ways; by monthly invoice, cheque or cash on the day.

**General health** – if you are chronically tired or depressed your appetite may be affected. These factors combined with reduced taste sensation, make it is easy to lose interest in food and food preparation which potentially leads to snacking on high fat / high salt / sugary quick fixes.

**Social** – Living on your own and eating well is challenging due to the social aspects of preparing and eating food. Why not invite a friend, neighbour or family member around to eat with you once or twice a week. Get them to bring something and share the cost and experience. Find a social club you can

eat at occasionally. Use healthy pre-made meals from the supermarket. Cook up extra amounts and freeze portions so you don't have to cook everyday. Think about other ideas that will help you to eat well and put the pleasure back into eating.

### **Financial**

If your income is reduced, there could be a temptation to cut down on the food you buy. Be careful not to cut out healthy staple foods which are usually the cheapest £ for £. Pasta, rice and bread can be bought very reasonably as can fruit and vegetables in season. An example of how you pay more for processed foods is this: a bag of potatoes will cost around 60p/kg but frozen chips will cost in excess of £2/kg. Turn the potato into crisps and the cost soars up to £6 - £12/kg! Buy small amounts of perishables to avoid waste. Avoid stocking up on foods of poor nutritional quality such as sweet biscuits, cake, crisps, soft drink and confectionary. They tend to use up your food budget, are concentrated in calories, and yet are poor sources of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.



## Top Tips

- Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Generally, don't skip meals.

29% of survey participants were not regularly eating three meals a day.

- Make sure you know how to interpret food labels so you can make the best quality choices. See the web sites below for more advice on portion sizes and quantities in general or speak to a dietitian.
- Stay safe with your food by making note of use by dates, preparing food on clean surfaces and cooking raw meat, especially chicken, thoroughly.
- A rich source of nutrients can be found just under the skin of fruit and vegetables so don't throw away the goodness by over-peeling (or overcooking) and eat the skin when you can.
- Remember that staple, unprocessed foods are most often the cheapest £ for £.
- Experiment with new foods and aim to eat a wide variety of foods.
- Avoid being either overweight or underweight –each is bad for your health.

## Summary

Eating good quality food and drinking sufficient fluids will help to: maintain a healthy weight; reduce the risk of developing lifestyle diseases; assist in the management of heart disease and diabetes; keep the skin healthy which in turn helps prevent pressure ulcers; encourage regular bowel and bladder function and fight infections. Food also plays an important social role and is a very pleasurable aspect of life.

## Useful contacts

British Nutrition Foundation  
<http://www.nutrition.org.uk/healthyageing> (for some great resources)

British Dietetic Association :  
[www.bda.uk.com](http://www.bda.uk.com)  
Tel: 0121 200 8080

Diabetes UK  
<http://www.diabetes.org.uk>  
Careline: 0845 120 2960

British Heart Foundation :  
[www.bhf.org.uk](http://www.bhf.org.uk)  
Main Line: 020 7935 0185

Heart Information Line: 08450 70 80 70  
(open Mon, Tues, Fri 9am-5pm and  
Weds, Thurs 8am-6pm)

## Further reading

SIA Guide on *Diet and Exercise*  
available from the SIA Web Site.