

# Steps to Ageing Well

## Step 2: Care of the Skin



## 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



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.



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## SKIN

### The Functions of the Skin

Skin acts to protect internal organs from disease, excrete waste products, regulate body temperature and provide sensation through nerve endings. Skin functioning is affected following spinal cord injury (SCI).



### Risk Factors

The skin is a living organ and with age becomes thinner and loses its elasticity. Circulation becomes sluggish and this reduces the amount of nutrients feeding it. All of these factors make the skin more susceptible to breaking down.

***In the Ageing Well Survey, 2007, skin care issues were among the top three health priorities identified by respondents.***

### Pressure Sores

Following SCI, skin is more susceptible to developing pressure sores and they continue to be one of the leading complications.

The European Pressure Ulcer Advisory Panel defines a pressure sore as 'An area of localised damage to the skin and underlying tissue caused by pressure, shear, friction and / or a combination of these'

Pressure sores are caused when the blood flowing to an area is interrupted.

Sitting or lying in the same position for long periods will reduce blood supply to that area and start a pressure sore. Having a pressure sore can result in weeks, even months in bed. If hospitalisation is required, this can create its own risks of secondary infection and in addition puts a strain on family members. Days off work are lost and social life interrupted. The affected area will be vulnerable to breaking down again. The human and financial costs of pressure sores are huge.

### What can you do to help keep your skin healthy and intact?

- Don't smoke, this reduces oxygen and other essential nutrients getting to the skin. Smoking affects the arteries causing blood pressure to rise.
- Try to keep your weight within a healthy range. Excessive weight causes added pressure and should be avoided. Being too thin can also cause problems. As we age, we naturally lose muscle mass and this reduces essential protection. In other words, a 'little bit of padding' helps to avoid bony protrusions putting pressure on skin. Also your immune system could be weakened if you are underweight.
- Keep well hydrated, 6-8 cups of water per day is recommended. Ideal drinks are water, milk and juice. Try to limit your caffeine intake as this can cause you to lose body fluids by increasing urine output.
- Keep alcohol intake to within the recommended levels.
- Eat good quality food, including adequate protein for tissue repair. Include nutritious foods from all of the food groups:
- Keep your skin clean and dry – contact with urine and faeces is particularly damaging to the skin. When drying yourself, pat dry rather than rubbing the skin. Think about

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using a barrier cream to keep the skin moist.

- Keep your immune system healthy – even mental health issues such as depression can alter your immune response to infections.
- Use the correct equipment for your needs: ask your OT for a re-assessment if your needs have changed with time.
- Change/replace worn out equipment: keep up to date with new types of equipment and technology.
- Stay vigilant, if you've never had a pressure sore it doesn't follow that you never will.
- Take extra care of your skin during episodes of illness as your skin is at high risk during these times. E.g. Extra pillows are useful for support and protection when you are confined to bed.
- Avoid swelling (oedema) of the skin, and don't leave it untreated.
- Inform new carers exactly how you wish to be handled / treated.
- Use a hoist for transferring – ageing skin is less resistant to shearing forces.
- Check skin, using a mirror or get your carer to do this twice a day (in the morning before dressing and before bedtime).
- Know where the vulnerable pressure points are on your body. (See SIA's Pressure Care Management Fact Sheet).
- When in bed, change position every 2 hours
- When in a chair - move every 20 minutes or so by lifting or moving from side to side / forwards (in line with what is best for your level of injury).

**Top Tip** - You or your carer could keep a record of pressure sore history, including how long you had to stay on bed rest plus any other relevant information which may help if the sore should re-occur.



### What to do if you think a pressure sore is forming?

**Take action immediately!!**

When you notice the first signs of a pressure sore, it's telling you damage is already happening. The only way for the sore to heal is to keep pressure off of it.

1. Start on bed rest and continue until the mark disappears. A cold compress can be applied (make sure you protect any cold objects with a towel before applying to the skin).
2. Try to find the cause of the pressure sore.
3. Call your District Nurse within 24-48 hours of first noticing the mark.

You can take a photograph of the sore and text or e mail it to your Spinal Cord Injury Centre Outpatient Department for advice (by prior arrangement).

When the affected area has healed, resume your normal activities slowly. The skin of scar tissue from old pressure sores is weaker and prone to breaking down again.

**The condition of your skin reflects your overall health.**

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## **Summary**

Maintain a healthy skin routine with good hygiene and care; be vigilant in checking your skin twice a day; maintain an ideal bodyweight; relieve pressure regularly; and eat and drink adequately. These are key lifestyle habits to adopt in preventing pressure sores. Remember, keeping skin healthy is a constant process.

## **Further Reading**

SIA Fact Sheet entitled *Pressure Care Management* for further details.

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