

AGEING WELL

FACTSHEETS

sia spinal
injuries
association
FOR LIFE AFTER SPINAL CORD INJURY



WALKERS

Steps to Ageing Well for Walkers with Spinal Cord Injury

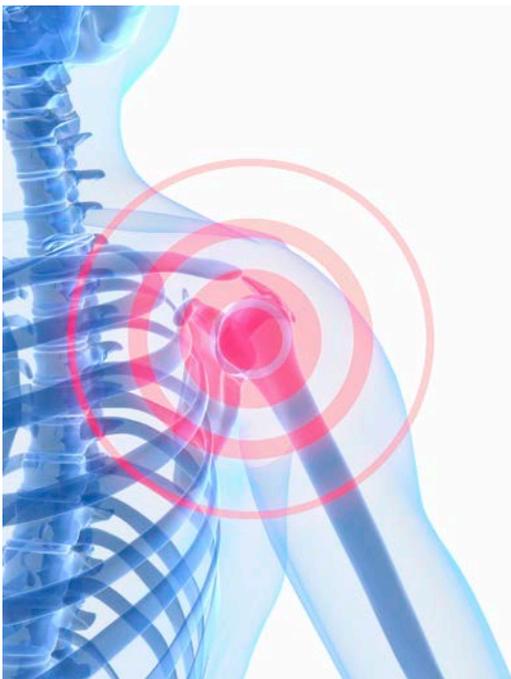
Injury

What are the potential physical changes?

- Wear and tear on shoulders, elbows, wrists, hands
- Wear and tear on knees
- Changes in bowel and bladder function
- Change in skin viability
- Increase in fatigue and weakness
- Changes in levels of pain – pain can increase or decrease
- Changes in severity of spasms.

How to reduce the impact of wear and tear on upper limbs

- Regular reviews with your physiotherapist, especially if you are noticing changes
- Use of correct walking aids to reduce strain on elbows, wrist and shoulders
- Use of splints e.g. Nights splints to support wrist joints
- Making sure your current aids still fit for purpose or should you be replacing them
- Ask a physiotherapist for exercises to help you stay flexible and avoid stiffness – this will also help prevent injury
- Be aware of warning signs and symptoms of conditions such as *carpal tunnel syndrome and **olecranon bursitis and seek early advice.



How to reduce pressure on knees

- Keeping your weight steady helps and try not to yo-yo in weight
- Report abnormal levels of pain and do not disguise pain by taking large amounts of painkillers
- Re-assess your walking aids. Are they doing you more harm than good?
- Ask your physiotherapist what exercises you can do to strengthen the muscles around the knee joints to help keep them strong.



Changes in bowel function

The bowel can become sluggish with age causing constipation. There may be an increased risk of:

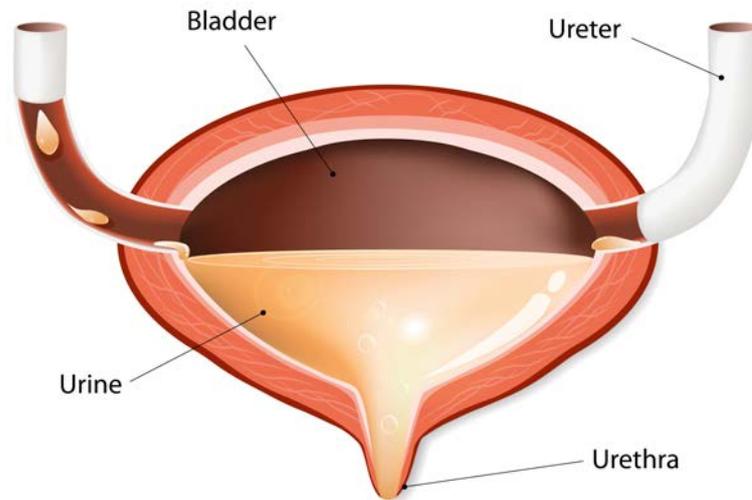
- **Haemorrhoids:** get treatment if they become troublesome e.g. if you notice bleeding
- **Bowel cancer:** – be aware of signs and symptoms, pain and bleeding are the obvious early signs

The NHS Bowel Cancer Screening Programme offers screening every two years to all men and women aged 60 to 69. People over 70 can request a screening kit by calling the freephone helpline on **0800 707 6060**

- Monitor changes in your bowel habits and seek advice from professionals. You may need to adjust your diet, it is best to make small adjustments at first and keep a record of changes you've made. You can make an appointment to see a Dietitian at your SCI Centre
- Medications you have been taking for a long period of time, may affect your bowel; this mainly results in hard stools leading to constipation.

Changes in bladder function

The ageing bladder loses tone and the lining becomes thinner.



Top Tips

- Try to reduce / prevent urinary tract infections (UTIs) by drinking the recommended level fluids and sticking to best practice in bladder management
- Regular medical check-ups at your SCIC to monitor kidney function and check for early signs of stone formation in either the bladder or the kidneys
- Be aware of the early signs of prostate enlargement (in men) – currently there is no organized screening programme for prostate cancer.
- Here is the link to the Prostate Cancer Risk Management Programme
www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk/prostate/index.html
- Bladder cancer - be alert for symptoms of blood in urine.
- Urodynamic tests e.g. measuring how well the bladder empties are available at most SCI Centres.

Continence support

- Your Spinal Cord Injury Centre
- Continence Specialist Nurse – based at your GP Surgery
- SIA Advice Line **T: 0800 980 0501** or **T: 01908 604191 Ext. 203**
- Bladder and Bowel Foundation Helpline
T: 0845 345 0165

Skin Management

Ageing skin loses elasticity, gets thinner and the circulation to it is reduced, adding to the risk of pressure ulcers.



Top tips

- Pressure ulcers can develop at any time, so always stay vigilant
- You may need to purchase specialist pressure relieving equipment for the first time especially if you are less active than you were and sit for longer periods of time.

Who can advise on care of skin?

- Staff at your SCI Centre
- Tissue Viability Nurse, based at your GP surgery
- District Nurse.

Fatigue and Weakness

Walkers complain of fatigue, sometimes accompanied by loss of muscle function, loss of strength, changes in sensation.

Pain may be a major contributory factor to fatigue



Take fatigue seriously – it may be associated with how long you have been injured. It probably won't go away on its own.

- Try to determine the underlying cause of your fatigue
- Consider changes in your daily routines, e.g. the amount of times you go up and down stairs
- Consider changes in equipment / aids you use to carry out daily tasks
- Consider use of a wheelchair, a) both for preserving energy, b) for preserving upper limbs and c) for your safety, especially when in crowds
- Exercise – the right type and quantity e.g. Yoga, Pilates. You can get advice from your physiotherapist or go to a local gym which employs competent trainers.



Pain

Pain is an important warning sign that something is physically wrong.

Probably as many as 80% of SCI people live with a degree of pain and it can be chronic or intermittent – it may increase or decrease with age.

When you have full movement but impaired sensation, the potential for injury to joints and limbs is increased and you may be unaware of an injury or the potential for injury.

Spasms

If spasms are becoming problematical, you can monitor the frequency and severity so that you can report this to your GP or spinal consultant and be prescribed the appropriate medication.

Spasms may increase or decrease with age – this is very individual

- Your Physiotherapist can advise appropriate exercises
- Wearing splints may help too
- Medication – Baclofen is the most popular treatment for spasms in SCI

Psychological changes

- Mood changes - can be due to a) hormonal changes, b) personal issues
- Depression - get family support if possible, obtain appropriate treatment.

Other possible changes

- Disturbed sleep patterns – try to establish the cause
- Intolerance to medications – e.g. long term use of analgesics
- Memory loss.

Wellness in later life

Lifestyle

The length of time since injury has a significant impact on how you cope with daily tasks.

It is important to focus on changing nutritional needs and adapt your diet. Getting enough and the right type of exercise will help maintain strength.

Love and sex with your partner; it is important for the feel good factor, even hugging releases 'feel good' chemicals.

You may need to consider managing the recurrence of old symptoms e.g. infections, fatigue, pain and sensitivity.

It is important to attend your annual MOT / medical health checks at a specialist centre / Spinal Cord Injury Centre.

Try to source support from appropriate healthcare professionals both within your SCIC and in the community.

Support in Later Life

Accessing care for the first time

Professionals who can help: Adult Social Care at your local Social Services, GPs, District Nurses.

Accessing increased levels of care

- Adult Social Care – Social Services, you can apply for a ‘needs assessment’
- You may need ‘critical’ or ‘substantial’ need in a crisis
- Benefits – you may be applying for extra benefits e.g. carer’s allowance.

Falls prevention

- As you age, decline in muscle strength may contribute to loss of balance and change in gait. You may be more likely to fracture a lower limb due to osteoporosis in a fall.
- Check your walking aids are still fit for purpose.
- Keep up to date with regular eye and hearing tests.
- Ask your GP and Practice Nurse for regular blood pressure checks and report any episodes of dizziness etc.
- Your home is a potentially dangerous environment, many falls occur in the home. Never leave objects on stairs. Make sure lighting is adequate especially in potential danger areas e.g. steps.
- Think about using a wheelchair part-time to avoid fatigue. If you are tired you may be more likely to have a fall.

Social changes in Later Life

It is important to manage adjustments to ageing and thereby maintain as much independence as possible.

- You may experience difficulty accessing SCI services.
- Your partner/carer may be experiencing health problems and not able to support you fully.

- Loss of a parent or partner or main carer can be devastating.
- You may start to feel abandoned by various services.
- You may have to consider long term care facilities – e.g. a Residential or Nursing Home.

What could help you adapt to later life?

- Emotional support from family and friends, losing contact
- could lead to feelings of isolation
- Seeking practical help for things you now find difficult e.g help in the house or garden
- Adjustment to disability – by use of additional equipment
- Positive mental outlook – seek the company of positive people
- Healthy lifestyle – diet, exercise and regular health check-ups
- Appropriate health care facilities, which are close by
- Financial security – seek professional advice about benefits, pensions
- Maintaining existing hobbies and / or finding new interests.



**Carpal Tunnel Syndrome is a condition that causes numbness, tingling and in later stage pain in the hand and fingers. Pins and needles, a dull ache and weakness in the thumb, may also be present. The condition is caused by compression of the median nerve. The median nerve controls sensation and movement in the hands.*

***A bursa is a small fluid-filled sac that cushions and facilitates movement at the meeting point of bones, muscles, tendons, ligaments and skin. There are many bursae in the human body and they can be found in major joints including the elbow, shoulder, ankle, hip and knee. Bursitis is the inflammation of a bursa.*

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ABOUT SIA

The Spinal Injuries Association (SIA) is the leading national user-led charity for spinal cord injured (SCI) people. Being user led, we are well placed to understand the everyday needs of living with spinal cord injury and are here to meet those needs by providing key services to share information and experiences, and to campaign for change ensuring each person can lead a full and active life. We are here to support you from the moment your spinal cord injury happens, and for the rest of your life.

For more information contact us via the following:

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SIA House
2 Trueman Place
Oldbrook
Milton Keynes
MK6 2HH

T: 01908 604 191 (Mon – Fri 9am – 5pm)

T: 0800 980 0501 (Freephone Advice Line, Mon – Fri, 11am – 1pm/2pm – 4.30pm)

W: www.spinal.co.uk

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