

LIVING WITH SCI

FACTSHEETS

sia spinal
injuries
association
FOR LIFE AFTER SPINAL CORD INJURY



POSTURAL HYPOTENSION

Postural hypotension – (a drop in blood pressure)

Spinal cord injury can have a profound effect on all systems of the body including your cardiovascular system. You will probably find that your normal blood pressure is lower than it used to be. This can mean you can be susceptible to a condition known as postural hypotension.

Postural hypotension is a drop in blood pressure when moving from a flat to an upright position. If you have a high spinal cord injury, particularly T6 and above, you may experience a feeling of faintness or you may pass out briefly after moving too quickly, for example:

- from lying down to sitting up in bed
- shortly after transferring into your wheelchair
- When standing in a frame.

When we alter position, our blood vessels automatically respond to ensure consistent blood supply to our brains and major organs. Following spinal cord injury the feeling of faintness occurs because, as you sit up or change position, the vessels are slow to respond and blood can drain to the lower parts of the body. This leads to a drop in blood pressure (postural hypotension) making you feel faint.

There are several ways to prevent or overcome faintness:

- Elevate the back of the bed slowly, so that you sit up in bed in stages before getting into your wheelchair. If faintness occurs, lie down again, wait for a few minutes and then sit up more slowly. Once sat up, wait 15-20 minutes before transferring into your wheelchair.
- When you first transfer into your wheelchair, elevate your footplates for a short period. If you become faint in your wheelchair even with your legs elevated, you should recline your backrest. If none of the above is possible and you feel faint, it may be necessary to ask a helper to put the brakes on and tilt your wheelchair backwards until your head and neck are nearly horizontal. A second person could lift your feet up. Wait for a few minutes and the feeling should pass
- Alternatively, it may be possible for you to lean forward in your chair. Take special care that you will not overbalance. It will be safer if you are wearing a lap belt and if someone is with you.
- Some people use TED stockings or abdominal binders to lessen the effect of gravity on blood pressure. If you have ongoing problems from low blood pressure, speak to your doctor as medication can also help.
- Avoid a large meal immediately before or after transfer into your wheelchair.
- If the problem persists, speak to your consultant, as medication may be beneficial. Although most people only experience postural hypotension for a few weeks when they start getting up into a wheelchair for the first time, it can be persistent. It may also occur if you have been on bed rest for a period, for example, due to a pressure

ulcer.



Take care when you start getting up again, you may be taken by surprise!

Some people are more prone to postural hypotension than others are. If so you may need to wear elasticated 'anti-embolism' stockings and an 'abdominal binder', which is like an elastic corset. These will help to prevent the blood pooling in the lower part of your body, thereby keeping your blood pressure up. Make sure any compression garments you use are not too tight and therefore liable to cause pressure ulcers. Eventually, as your body begins to adjust, you may be able to stop wearing the abdominal binder and later the stockings

Using a Standing Frame

If you have postural hypotension when moving from lying to sitting, it is likely that you will have similar difficulties when standing. You may feel faint more quickly if you have not used the standing frame before your physiotherapist should be present. If you have not stood in the frame for some time, you should have someone around to assist should you become faint.

Should this occur, you will need to sit back down in your wheelchair and follow the advice given above. If the sensation of feeling faint does not improve or if it reoccurs a few minutes later, you may need to go back to bed and lie flat for a while.

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Revised June 2020

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.

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PLEASE SUPPORT SIA

SIA relies on fundraising, donations and gifts in wills to provide services that help spinal cord injured people rebuild their lives.

With your help, we can provide the right support to spinal cord injured people and their families and friends so they can enjoy a full and independent life after injury. Your donation today will go towards changing someone's life.

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