Spinal Cord Injury (Paraplegic): Care Instructions

Your Care Instructions

A spinal cord injury occurs when a bone of the spine (vertebra) cuts or presses on the spinal cord. This can happen after a fall, car accident, or sports injury. It can also happen if something pierces the spinal cord. A spinal cord injury stops the communication between the brain and the rest of the body. The closer the injury is to the head, the more the body is affected.

A serious spinal cord injury in the middle of the back usually causes loss of use of the legs (paralysis). It also usually causes loss of feeling in the legs. Loss of use and feeling in the legs is called paraplegia.

First treatments for spinal cord injuries include preventing more damage to the spine and spinal cord. This can be done with braces, casts, straps, or surgery. Medicine may reduce swelling in the spinal cord. You may need surgery to remove bone, straighten the spine, or make the spine more stable.

Long-term rehabilitation includes exercises to strengthen muscles that still work. You will also get help learning how to use braces and other tools to do everyday tasks. Researchers are working on new treatments. Some medicines may help the spinal cord heal. Implanted devices may help restore lost function.

Realizing you are paralyzed is scary. You will feel many emotions. And you may need help coping. Seek out family, friends, and counselors for support. You also can do things at home to make yourself feel better while you go through treatment.

Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

How can you care for yourself at home?

- Let yourself grieve for the things you can no longer do. Talk about your feelings with a family member, friend, or counselor. This can help you recover as much as possible.
- Learn to take care of your bladder. This helps you avoid getting a urinary tract infection. You may need to insert a thin tube into your bladder regularly. This tube is called a catheter. It drains the urine from your bladder. A nurse will show you how to do this.
- Work with your doctor or other health professional to make a bowel management program. This will help you have regular bowel movements.
- Check your body often for signs of pressure injuries. These can be slow to heal and may become infected. They usually occur on the skin over bony areas such as the knees, hips, heels, or tailbone. And pressure injuries can occur in places where the skin folds over on itself. Change positions often to help prevent these sores.
- Be alert for signs of a common problem called autonomic dysreflexia. This can happen when your body can't control blood pressure. It can cause headache, clammy skin, sweating, nausea, and a slow heart rate.
- Do the exercises recommended by your therapist. Strong muscles can help you do everyday activities.
- Get help with coping if you need it. Discuss your concerns with your doctor, counselor, or other health professional.

- Join a support group. Talking about your injury with other people who have problems like yours can help you learn to live with a spinal injury.

When should you call for help?

Call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You have signs of a common problem called autonomic dysreflexia and the symptoms do not go away after 20 minutes. These include:
  - A pounding headache.
  - A flushed face or red patches on your skin above the level of the spinal injury.
  - Sweating above the level of the spinal injury.
  - Nausea.
  - Slow heart rate.
  - Cold, clammy skin above the level of the spinal injury.

Call your doctor now or seek immediate medical care if:

- You have signs of infection, such as:
  - Increased pain, swelling, warmth, or redness.
  - Red streaks leading from an incision.
  - Pus draining from an incision.
  - A fever.
- You need help with urination and bowel movements.
- You have cloudy or foul-smelling urine.
- You have pressure injuries.
- You feel hopeless and depressed.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if you have any problems.

Where can you learn more?

Go to https://www.healthwise.net/patiented

Enter **Z114** in the search box to learn more about **"Spinal Cord Injury (Paraplegic): Care Instructions".**

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