

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



### What does the spinal cord do?

The spinal cord is a collection of nerves that carry messages to and from the brain and to the rest of the body. It is protected by rings of bone called vertebrae. These bones make up the spine and are our 'back bones'.

### What is Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)?

SCI can happen due to trauma caused by an accident or through an illness and means that the spinal cord has been damaged in some way. This results in paralysis from the point of injury down.

### What are the effects of a SCI?

Generally, the higher up the back or neck the injury occurs the more loss of function and sensation the person will experience. It will also depend on whether the spinal cord is completely severed or only partially damaged.

### “I keep hearing ‘Paraplegia’, ‘Tetraplegia’, ‘Complete’ and ‘Incomplete’ – what do these mean?”

**Paraplegia** means the paralysis of legs and possibly some stomach muscles.

**Tetraplegia** (or Quadraplegia) means the paralysis of legs, arms, stomach and some chest muscles.

**Complete injury** is where there is no muscle function, voluntary movement or sensation below the level of the injury. Both sides are equally affected.

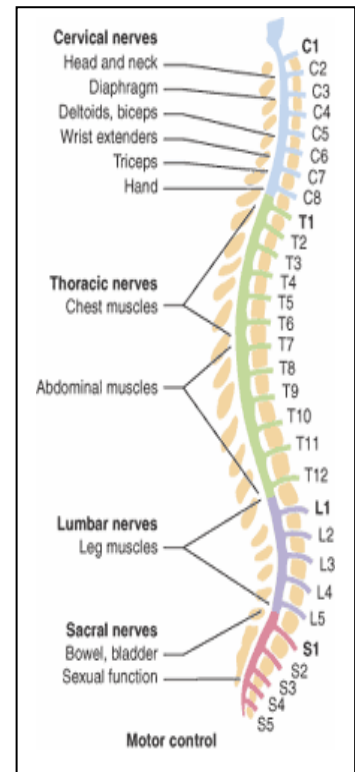
**Incomplete injury** means that there is some muscle function below the level of injury. You may be able to move one limb and not the other and have more function on one side than the other. Sensation may be spared meaning that you may be able to feel some parts that cannot be moved. Due to medical advances, incomplete injuries are becoming more common.

### Why won't my doctor tell me my exact prognosis?

It can take up to two years for your body to recover from a spinal cord injury and so a clear and 100% correct prognosis is difficult to give, especially in the cases of incomplete spinal cord injury.

### Is it just my arms and legs that may be affected?

As the spinal cord carries all the information to and from the brain to the rest of the body some bodily systems may be affected by spinal cord damage. That is, as well as loss of sensation and muscle function, individuals may experience dysfunction of the bladder and bowel, inability to sweat below the level of injury, chronic pain, low blood pressure, inability to regulate blood pressure effectively and reduced control of body temperature.



Very high injuries (C-1, C-2) may affect the nerves to and from the diaphragm and it is likely that breathing will have to be helped with a ventilator.

### **Can you recover from SCI?**

When SCI occurs there may be some swelling around the spinal cord. After days or weeks the swelling should go down and some function *may* return. Those who experience partial injury or damage to the spinal cord may recover some feeling or movement following the wearing off of the initial 'spinal shock'. With some incomplete injuries it can take up to 2 years for the extent of the injury to be fully known. However, only a very small number of individuals with SCI's recover all function.

### **How long will I have to be in hospital?**

The process of rehabilitation after SCI can take many months depending on many different factors. On average paraplegics stay at the NSIC 4-6 months and tetraplegics stay approx. 6-9 months.

Plans for your discharge may seem to start very early on in your stay but this is to try and ensure that as much is in place as possible for when you've completed your rehab here. However, you may need to move to an interim place before you go 'home' if you are still looking for somewhere new to live or works still needs to be carried out on an existing residence.

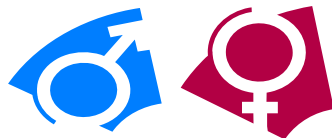
### **Is there a cure for SCI?**



At the moment there is no cure for SCI. However, there is a lot of research going on and there have been significant advances in lab-based work on animals. The spinal cord is too delicate and important to risk experimental work of this kind in humans and so it is important to keep an open mind about such research and to understand that it is at a basic stage. We are a long way off from having medical treatments that can even be trialled on patients. The advances in medicine have meant that doctors are better able to reduce the damage at the time of injury, which gives people the best

possible chance to recover. The greater number of incomplete injuries now, compared to the past, is owed to this advance.

### **Can I have sex?**



Sex has various meanings for different people. Just because you have a SCI does not mean you cannot have sex, but it may not be the same as it was before your injury. SCI can affect sexual functioning through loss of sensation, orgasm and the inability to maintain an erection. There are a number of therapies that allow individuals with SCI to enjoy an active sex life that is satisfying and fulfilling, either by facilitating intercourse or other non-penetrative methods.

For many people they may feel differently about their bodies following the injury and it can be hard to discuss something as personal as sex. Lots of people worry about what will happen and how it will affect them and their partners. It is important to get good accurate information and to discuss your worries, when you want to and in a way that is comfortable for you.

Within the NSIC there are Psychologists, a Family Counsellor, Peer Support as well as experienced members of nursing staff both on the wards and in the Outpatients department for you to talk to about these issues.

## **What about fertility? Will I ever have children?**

### **Men**

Fertility is often affected in men with SCI, but men with SCI do father children. The extent to which your fertility is affected depends on many factors related to you and your injury. It is important to get good, accurate information. The NSIC runs a fertility clinic and you can contact the Spinal Outpatients department for more information.

### **Women**

Fertility is usually affected in the first months of SCI as your periods may cease. However, for many women, the ability to become pregnant returns within a few months. Most spinal cord injured women conceive normally, have normal pregnancies and deliver normally.



## **Will I ever be able to work again?**

If you want to you can. Some people return to their previous jobs, others retrain or learn new skills. People with SCI share the same general employment rights as other workers, but there are also some special provisions under the Disability Discrimination Act. You can get a lot of help to plan your return to employment or look at your options for retraining or studying through the Employment Clinic held at the NSIC once a month.

## **How will I cope?**



Spinal cord injury is a huge trauma that you are almost certainly not prepared for. Such a trauma can cause any number of negative emotions, which may have as much impact on your life as physical changes to your body. It is natural to feel emotions such as grief, disbelief, shock, denial, guilt, depression and anxiety. You may feel all, some or none of these. It is as important to address these emotional issues as it is the physical aspects of your injury. Many people seek help and advice from their named nurse, doctor or psychologist. Members of your family can ask to be referred to the Family Counsellor for support.



## **Will my life ever be the same again?**

One may assume that quality of life is greatly compromised when a SCI occurs. SCI can disrupt not just a body but an entire biography of plans, daily activities and valued occupations. But even though these changes may occur there is more to quality of life than physical health and function. These are unique to the individual. For example, it may be financial or personal security, emotional intimacy and strong relationships, helping others, spiritual well being or intellectual stimulation that enhances your quality of life. Re-focusing values and re-establishing a view of the self as able and valuable following injury can help you get the most out of life, meaning life with a SCI can be rich and fulfilling.