

Autonomic Dysreflexia

Autonomic dysreflexia is one of the most serious life-threatening complications of a spinal cord injury.

It is something that can affect you if your paralysis is T6 or above.

It is vital that you, your family and carers are aware of the:

- possible causes of autonomic dysreflexia
- signs and symptoms
- treatment.

If you do not treat it quickly it can lead to dangerously high blood pressure and become an emergency.

Why Does It Happen

Autonomic dysreflexia can be caused by any painful stimulus which occurs below the level of injury.

As the spinal cord is damaged, signals cannot pass normally to the brain.

Normally the autonomic nervous system maintains our body homeostasis or balance at an unconscious level. This involuntary part of the nervous system controls the functions of the body which occur automatically i.e. heart rate, blood pressure, appetite, temperature control, etc.

In high spinal injury T6 or above this balance is interrupted. The body produces exaggerated, abnormal nerve signals which cause problems above and below the level of injury.

What Are The Signs And Symptoms?

The signs and symptoms can be mild or severe:

- Pounding headache
- Flushing blotchy skin
- Slow heart rate
- Sweating above injury level
- Goosebumps
- Tingling sensation on face or neck

- Stuffy nose
- Anxiety
- High blood pressure

If you have experienced autonomic dysreflexia you will be familiar with the signs and symptoms which affect you and will be able to alert someone quickly.

The Most Common Triggers

Bladder irritation due to

- Overfull bladder
- Bladder, kidney stones
- Urinary tract infection
- Blocked catheter

Bowels

- Constipation
- Distension
- Haemorrhoids

Skin

- Prolonged pressure
- Pressure sore
- Ingrown toenail
- Deep vein thrombosis
- Fracture

How do we treat Autonomic dysreflexia?

It is important to find and relieve the cause of dysreflexia.

Try to identify the cause from the most common triggers.

Locating, treating or removing the cause will allow your symptoms to settle.

Firstly raise your head by sitting up in bed to a maximum of 45 degrees, this allows blood to pool to lower limbs and your blood pressure will fall.

If symptoms persist your doctor may prescribe medication such as sublingual nifedipine 10mg. If symptoms remain despite taking nifedipine contact your doctor.

It is important to have sublingual nifedipine to hand even when out of hospital.

We advise you to carry a medical alert card for the emergency treatment of autonomic dysreflexia.