

Muscle Spasm

The nerves of the spinal cord and brain form a complex circuit that controls our body movements. Information on sensations or processes such as touch, movement or muscle stretch is sent up the spinal cord to the brain. In response, the brain interprets the signal and sends the necessary commands back down the spinal cord to tell your body how to react. The reaction of the body, such as jerking away from a hot object, is a reflex and happens quickly and automatically.

After a spinal cord injury, the normal flow of signals is disrupted, and the message does not reach the brain. Instead, the signals are sent back to the spinal cord and cause a reflex muscle spasm. This can result in a twitch, jerk or stiffening of the muscle. Just about any touch, movement or irritation can trigger and sustain spasms.

Mild spasm is actually quite good in helping to maintain muscle tone, bone strength and reducing osteoporosis. They help maintain circulation and can even assist transfers. However severe spasm is very disruptive to every day activities, wellbeing and mood.

However, spasms can act as a warning mechanism to identify pain or problems below the level of sensation such as:

- Pressure sores
- Ingrown toe nails
- Constipation
- Urinary tract infections
- Over distended bladder
- Fatigue
- Mood changes (excitement, anxiety etc)
- Postural alignment or contractures

Controlling or Reducing Spasm

- There are several different drugs that your doctor can prescribe to control spasm.
- Staying supple will help reduce spasm. If you or your carer can keep your limbs supple by actively or passively stretching your muscles then they are less likely to contract in response to minor stretches.
- Another way of trying to reduce spasm is to stand on a standing frame or tilt table.
- Lying on your stomach for half an hour a day can simulate the stretch standing gives without the weight bearing.
- Keep as active as you can.
- Maintaining good eating habits can help prevent infections, constipation and sores.
- Reduce how much alcohol you drink and the number of cigarettes you smoke.
- Minimise stress levels.