Nutrition following a Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)

Eating and drinking well are important to support healing and recovery after a SCI. After the injury there may be specific treatments and therapies you will need, which can affect how well you eat and drink. Good nutrition can help to support your progress from your injury through to your rehabilitation.

This booklet contains tips which can help to support you, both in the short term after injury in hospital and in the longer term when you may be in a rehabilitation setting and then back home.

Not eating as well?

After a spinal injury there are several different things that can have an effect on how much you are able to eat and drink.

You may be required to stay on 'flat bed rest' for a number of weeks and be required to wear specific orthotics such as collars and braces. Eating while lying flat can be difficult, if you are able to lie on your side this can help a little. It may also become more difficult to hold food and cutlery to feed yourself. You may be provided with specialised cutlery, plates and bottles to help you. However, if this is still challenging, you may require some additional help with feeding from your nurses, family/carers.

Some people experience swallowing difficulties after a spinal injury and a referral to a Speech and Language Therapist may be needed for individual advice.

The effects of different medication and possibly the need for surgery also put extra strain on your body, as your body tries to recover and heal.

These changes often take some time to adapt to. They can affect your appetite and result in you not eating as well. This can lead to weight loss, muscle loss and reduction in your strength. It can also lead to an increased chance of pressure area damage and slow your recovery.

Practical tips to help improve your nutrition whilst in hospital

If you are finding it difficult to eat, the following suggestions may help support your intake, particularly if you are required to remain flat on bed rest:

1) **Eat little and often**
   Large meals can sometimes feel overwhelming. Having small, regular meals and snacks throughout the day may be easier and help you maintain your energy levels.

2) Choose foods that are easy to eat

Softer foods may be easier to manage at first as they require less effort to cut up or chew.

Examples include:

- Mashed potatoes
- Scrambled eggs
- Pasta with sauce
- Rice dishes
- Cottage pie or shepherd's pie
- Porridge or cereals with milk
- Yogurt, custard or rice pudding
- Soft cooked vegetables
- Baked beans

3) Finger food options

Finger foods may be easier to pick up and eat, particularly if using cutlery is difficult.

Examples include:

- Sandwiches or wraps
- Pizza slices
- Mini sausage rolls
- Cheese chunks or cheese and crackers
- Boiled eggs
- Quiche slices
- Mini pasties
- Chicken pieces
- Mini cakes or muffins
- Biscuits
- Flapjacks or cereal bars

4) Liquid-based options

Liquid-based foods and drinks may be easier to manage, particularly if you are lying flat or experiencing any difficulties with swallowing more solid foods.

Examples include:

- Soups (especially creamy soups for extra energy)
- Smoothies
- Milkshakes
- Yogurt drinks
- Fortified milk drinks
- Custard or puddings
- Nutritional supplement drinks (if recommended by your Dietitian)

Your Dietitian may suggest oral nutritional supplements if you are unable to meet your nutritional needs through food alone.

5) Energy-rich snacks

If your appetite is reduced, choosing energy-rich foods can help you get more nutrition in smaller portions.

Examples include:

- Full-fat yogurt or Greek yogurt
- Cheese and crackers
- Peanut butter or spreads on toast
- Nuts and dried fruit
- Chocolate or flapjacks
- Ice cream
- Milk puddings such as custard or rice pudding

6) Making meals more nutritious

You may also find it helpful to:

- Add cheese to mashed potatoes, soups or pasta
- Use full-fat milk instead of lower-fat versions
- Add butter, cream or oil to meals
- Add milk powder to porridge, soups or mashed potatoes
- Add cream or yogurt to desserts

Enjoyment of your food

When you are in hospital food is often part of your treatment and it can lose its enjoyment. In the long term it is important to enjoy your food. There may be specialist equipment which your team can suggest to help you with your positioning, as well as the preparation and eating of your food and fluid.

Pressure areas

Having a SCI can increase your risk of developing a pressure injury/ulcer. This may occur if you are unable to move around sufficiently resulting in extra pressure on the skin. Being underweight or overweight can increase your risk of developing pressure injuries.

Nutrition plays a major role in preventing and treating pressure injuries. You can reduce your risk of pressure injury by:

- Eating a balanced diet including fruit and vegetables
- Drinking 6-8 glasses of fluids per day
- Following all advice given in regards to being turned in bed and use of appropriate pressure relieving mattresses

If you have a pressure injury your need for protein will be increased and it is important to ensure that you have a good vitamin and mineral intake. A Dietitian will work out your nutritional needs to encourage wound healing and give you individual advice including supplements if required.

Healthy bowels

After a SCI, there are many changes that may occur with your bowels.
If you are on bed rest or have a reduced activity levels it can take longer for food to move through your digestive system. Damage to the spinal cord itself can also affect the nerves in your bowel. Some patients will experience problems such as diarrhoea / constipation. You may also become less aware that it is time to empty your bowels and you may not have as much control over your bowels when they do open.

Bowel problems can significantly impact on your quality of life. You may be given certain medication and exercises to help your bowels. Eating enough fibre and drinking enough fluid is also essential for a successful bowel management. Fluid and fibre can help to support how quickly food moves through your digestive system and softens the stool to reduce constipation.

Here are some tips

- Aim for 5 portions of fruit and vegetables / salad per day (fresh, frozen dried or tinned)
- Include beans, oats and lentils in your diet
- Try to choose wholegrain foods e.g. bread, breakfast cereals, rice and pasta
- Aim to drink at least 8 glasses of fluid per day

Bone health

A natural part of the aging process is for bones to start gradually releasing their minerals such as calcium. This can happen quicker after a spinal cord injury. This can be due to not using your muscles and bones in the same way as you did before your injury, especially if you are not as physically active. The loss of calcium can increase the chance of bones fracturing and you developing Osteoporosis.

Here are a few tips

- Ensure to follow all advice regarding safe transfers and mobility to reduce the risks of any falls
- Ensure to include calcium containing foods with each meal. These include foods such as milk, yoghurt, cheese, non dairy alternatives supplemented with calcium, dark green vegetables, tinned fish (with small bones)
- Vitamin D helps our bodies absorb calcium; one of the best sources is from sunlight on our skin. If your skin is covered up outdoors and if you spend less time outdoors with direct sunlight it may be worth considering Vitamin D supplements. The NHS currently recommends 10 micrograms per day

Maintaining a healthy weight

In the longer term after SCI you may find that that your physical activities are more limited. Some people find over time that they are more likely to put on weight.
Maintaining a healthy weight and following a balanced diet is very important in the long term after your SCI. This will help with your with your overall health and wellbeing and reduce the risk of other health problems such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease. Remember small achievable changes to your diet will help you reach your goals.

Here are a few tips

- Aim for three meals a day, each meal to include a source of carbohydrate (e.g. bread, rice, pasta), protein (e.g. fish, chicken, meat, beans) and a portion of fruit and vegetables

- Aim to choose high fibre / wholegrain varieties where possible
- Aim for 5 portions of fruit and vegetables per day
- Limit your intake of high sugar foods and drinks
- Choose lower fat/diet versions where possible

Consider healthier cooking methods e.g. steaming, grilling and baking

Sustainability

Some of our patients ask questions about sustainability. The Dietitian can provide you with further information if needed. Quick and easy tip include:

- Try to choose season/local foods
- Look for foods with minimal packaging and recycle packaging where possible
- Try to minimise your food waste by planning meals, cooking in bulk/batches and only buying what you need

Please speak to your Dietitian if you require any further support or have any further queries regarding your diet.

Accessibility



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