



# **Nutrition following a Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)**

**Building healthier lives**

**UHB is a no smoking Trust**

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 '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, or your 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.

## Tips

- Softer foods may be easier to manage at first as they require less effort to cut up
- Finger foods such as sandwiches, pizzas, mini sausage rolls, cheese chunks, wraps, mini cakes and biscuits may be easier to pick up and eat

You may see a Dietitian who will advise on having small regular meals and snacks throughout the day. They may also advise on how to make your meals more nutritious and may suggest nutritional supplements for you to take.

## 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 with regards to being turned in bed and the 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 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 five 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 eight glasses of fluid per day

## Maintaining a healthy weight

In the longer term after an SCI you may find 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 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 five 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

## Bone Health

A natural part of the ageing 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 you follow all advice regarding safe transfers and mobility to reduce the risks of any falls
- Ensure you 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

## Enjoyment of your food

When you are in hospital food is often part of your treatment and it can lose its enjoyment. 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.

## 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.

Please use the space below to write down any questions you may have and bring this with you to your next appointment.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

If you require this information in another format, such as a different language, large print, braille or audio version please ask a member of staff or email **[patientexperience@uhb.nhs.uk](mailto:patientexperience@uhb.nhs.uk)**.

---

### **Nutrition and Dietetic**

Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham  
Mindelsohn Way, Edgbaston  
Birmingham, B15 2GW  
Telephone: 0121 371 2000

---