

# Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) and Alcohol Use



Many people take the social use of alcohol for granted. Having a few drinks with friends is a common way to relax and bond. But drinking may cause problems that people without a spinal cord injury (SCI) don't have to think about. People with SCI are at greater risk for alcohol abuse than the general population. And regularly drinking too much alcohol is not good for *anyone's* health. Before choosing to drink, discuss the issue with your healthcare team. They can help you make an informed choice about using alcohol responsibly.

## Alcohol and SCI

Alcohol slows brain function. This can impair memory, judgment, and coordination. This makes you less likely to follow your care program. When you are deciding if drinking is safe for you, think about the following:

- Will you remember to shift positions according to schedule when you're drinking?
- Can you safely operate your wheelchair or other assistive devices when you drink?
- Can you perform your bowel and bladder care correctly after drinking?
- After drinking, will you remember to check the safety of your limbs to prevent cuts, burns, and other injuries?
- Have you talked with your healthcare provider or pharmacist about how alcohol may affect any medicines you take?
- When you drink, do you stick to 1 or 2 drinks? Or do you regularly drink to excess?

## Reducing your risks

You can prevent the problems linked with alcohol by choosing not to drink. If you do choose to drink alcohol, do so only in moderation. And keep these tips in mind:

- Follow your healthcare provider's guidelines for how much alcohol you can drink safely. This amount is likely less than what it was before you had an SCI.
- Keep track of how much you're drinking. Drinking too much alcohol at once and too quickly makes problems more likely.
- Don't forget to shift your position according to schedule.
- Remember to empty your bladder when drinking. A bladder that's too full can lead to infections. It can also lead to a serious problem called autonomic dysreflexia (AD). This is a sudden spike in blood pressure that must be treated right away. (Ask your healthcare provider if you're at risk for AD.)
- Talk with your healthcare provider or pharmacist and know how alcohol will affect any medicines you take. If you choose to drink, certain medicine adjustments may need to be made.
- Never drink and drive.

## Do you have a problem?

These questions can help you take a closer look at your alcohol use:

- Have you ever felt the need to cut down on your drinking?
- Do you ever feel annoyed when people criticize your drinking?

- Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking?
- Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to help you relax or recover from a hangover?

If you answered yes to 1 or more of these questions, it may mean you have a problem drinking too much alcohol. Talk with your healthcare provider or a trained counselor in substance abuse. Seek help from a local support group. Or reach out to friends and family for support.

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