

# Pain Management following Spinal Cord Injury

Unfortunately pain is a relatively common problem following spinal cord injury.

Acute pain can occur soon after the injury and can be caused by many factors including:

- Damage to the bones, muscles and ligaments of the spine at the time of the injury.
- Damage to the spinal cord and/or spinal nerves at the time of the injury.
- Damage caused by other injuries e.g. fractures or muscle injuries of arms, legs or other body parts.
- The effects of any surgery required to treat these injuries.

This acute pain may be severe but it can usually be treated well with standard medications and usually improves over a period of weeks as the damaged tissues heal.

Pain that continues on for a period of months or years is usually called chronic pain and unfortunately, this type of pain may be much more difficult to treat.

Remember, that not everyone suffers from problems with pain and that there are many things that can be done to help.

## Types of Pain after SCI

There are different types of pain that occur after SCI and it is important to know about the different types because *the treatments are different*.

### **Musculoskeletal pain**

- This is pain that is caused by damage to bones, ligaments, muscles or joints.
- It is usually felt above the level of the injury or in areas where you are normal or near normal feeling.
- It is usually felt close to the damaged tissue i.e. if the shoulder is injured the pain is felt at or near the shoulder.
- It may be sharp or “dull and aching”.
- Chronic musculoskeletal pain is often caused by “wear and tear” of muscles or joints or because of problems with posture or muscle imbalance.

### **Neuropathic (Nerve) Pain**

- This is pain that is caused by direct damage to the spinal cord or spinal nerves.
- It is usually felt at the level of the injury (where feeling on your skin starts to become less) or below the level of the injury (where there is no feeling).
- It may be sharp, burning, stinging or shooting or it may be very difficult to “find the right words” to describe it.
- Even though this pain may be felt in the legs or hands or stomach it is usually not caused by problems in these areas but because of damage in the spinal cord at the site of the original injury.

## CONTACTS

Phone  
3406 2300

Freecall 1800 624 832  
(for regional clients)

Fax  
3406 2399

Email  
spot@health.qld.gov.au

Web  
www.health.qld.gov.au/qscis

Postal  
PO Box 6053  
Buranda, Q, 4102

Location  
3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Centro Buranda  
Cnr Cornwall St & Ipswich Rd  
Buranda, Q, 4102

Compiled Dec 2008  
Review Dec 2009

# Pain Management following Spinal Cord Injury

## CONTACTS

Phone  
3406 2300

Freecall 1800 624 832  
(for regional clients)

Fax  
3406 2399

Email  
spot@health.qld.gov.au

Web  
www.health.qld.gov.au/qscis

Postal  
PO Box 6053  
Buranda, Q, 4102

Location  
3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Centro Buranda  
Cnr Cornwall St & Ipswich Rd  
Buranda, Q, 4102

## Psychological Factors

- In the past, pain has been a poorly understood aspect of medicine. As we have come to understand more about pain and what causes it we have realised that psychological factors (the way we all think and behave when we have pain) are very important.
- We all know that when we are sick or in pain we may feel grumpy, irritable or depressed. This is a natural response to pain and suffering.
- This is important to remember because sometimes pain, especially when it becomes chronic is difficult to treat with medications alone.
- We also need to consider and treat our psychological reactions to pain as this helps us to reduce, control and cope with pain better.

## Treatment of Pain

- Treatment and management of pain is a multidisciplinary task i.e. there are many members of the team in the spinal injuries unit that may be able to help you with the pain. You are a very important member of this team.

## General Points

- Unfortunately pain is sometimes not easy to treat and many different types of treatment may need to be tried.
- Your pain is probably different from other people's pain and what works for someone else may not work for you.
- Medications are not always the answer and all medications have potential side effects.
- You should avoid excessive use of narcotic type drugs e.g. panadiene forte, endone, morphine as these can be addictive and can also cause severe constipation.
- You must avoid using illegal drugs or excessive alcohol to cope with the pain.

## Physical Treatments

- Musculoskeletal pain that is caused by problems with joints or muscles often respond to simple "hands on" treatment such as massage, hot or cold packs, muscle stretching or strengthening, ultrasound or electrical stimulation.
- Adjustment to the way you sit, walk or perform activities may also help.
- Your physiotherapist, occupational therapist or nurse may be able to help with these things.
- Simple medications such as regular Panadol or anti-arthritic drugs may also help.

## Medications

- Neuropathic (nerve) pain often does not respond well to simple medications such as panadol or to narcotic medications (these should be avoided)
- Medications that tend to work better for nerve pain include:
  - Anti-epilepsy drugs such as tegretol, epilim or gabapentin

Compiled Dec 2008  
Review Dec 2009

# Pain Management following Spinal Cord Injury

- Anti-depressant drugs such as amitriptyline or dothiepin All of these drugs have potentially serious side-effects and must not be commenced unless you have discussed the issue with your doctor.
- Unfortunately nerve pain is sometimes difficult to treat and requires “a trial and error approach” in combining the medications that give the best effect for your *individual pain*.

## Psychological Management

- Psychological strategies such as relaxation and special techniques and ways of thinking about the pain can be very helpful in controlling pain.
- Your social worker or psychologist can teach you these techniques and talk to you about other ways of coping with the pain.

## Other Management

- Occasionally nerve blocks, spinal injections or surgery may assist with pain management.
- This will be discussed with you by your doctor if these techniques might be helpful for your type of pain.

## CONTACTS

Phone  
3406 2300

Freecall 1800 624 832  
(for regional clients)

Fax  
3406 2399

Email  
spot@health.qld.gov.au

Web  
www.health.qld.gov.au/qscis

Postal  
PO Box 6053  
Buranda, Q, 4102

Location  
3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Centro Buranda  
Cnr Cornwall St & Ipswich Rd  
Buranda, Q, 4102

Compiled Dec 2008  
Review Dec 2009