

SPINAL INJURIES UNIT

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Your Arms and the Future



Do you worry about your arms and the future?

Following a spinal cord injury, your arms and hands are used for activities that the joints and muscles were not designed for, for example, lifting your whole body weight. Long term wear and tear on joints and muscles happens from transfers, pushing your wheelchair and other activities that you have to do every day.

Your arms and hands are very important in your independence and they need to be looked after. There are lots of things that you can do to protect your arms and hands for the future.

Acknowledge and treat pain early!

- If you are getting pain in your joints or muscles, see a health professional such as your doctor or physiotherapist about it. Treat it earlier rather than later.
- Ask yourself, is there a particular activity I do that causes pain and how can I change it to reduce the pain?
- It may be worth keeping a diary of when you get pain and what you are doing at the time

Look at the activities you do now!

- Is all your time and energy wasted on just doing your care routine in the morning? Can you make it easier?
- Using a mobile shower commode, small aids or changing the way you do your routine may be helpful. Accepting some help from a carer may also be something to think about.
- Do you constantly lift your body weight for pressure relief when in your wheelchair? Leaning forward or sideways or changing your cushion are some options.
- Think about other activities you do in a day – at work, at home, for recreation such as in the kitchen or on the computer. Are these difficult or painful?
- Different equipment or changing the environment is something to think about, an occupational therapist may be able to give you some advice.
- When you drive your car, do you collapse the wheelchair and pull it in with you? To decrease the strain on your arms, a folding wheelchair and a car hoist may be the answer.

What about your transfers!



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- How many transfers do you do in a day? Count them. Is there any you can decrease?
- This may mean changing your routine or using different equipment, for example a mobile shower commode or changing the way you manage your bladder
- Can you make your transfers easier? Transferring at the same height or using a transfer board can be helpful
- Try your transfers from different sides – does this help?
- Do you use your arm overhead or high on the wheelchair when you transfer?
- It is always best to keep your arms down close to your hips, this places the shoulder in a more stable position

Pushing your Wheelchair – What you can do!

- First thing to remember is that mobility is not an exercise. It is not any better for your arms to push long distances just for the sake of exercise.
- Use long smooth strokes when pushing your wheelchair
- Avoid pushing up steep hills or very uneven ground as this may cause damage to the joints
- Is your wheelchair adjusted to make it as easy as possible for you to push? You may need help with adjustments.
- Is your wheelchair lightweight? You may want to look at another wheelchair.
- Have you thought about powered mobility? There are many options that may suit your situation; for example powerdrive wheelchair or power assist wheels on your manual wheelchair. If you do opt for power, don't feel that you have to do lots of exercise to take the place of pushing.

Is my sitting posture a factor!

- Having good posture in your wheelchair is very important. This affects your skin as well as your position for pushing.
- Slumping - sitting with your hips too far forward - places the shoulder into a poor position for movement and may cause damage when you push.
- Sitting with your hips and spine uneven or with a 'scoliosis', causes uneven forces while you push and increases the risk of injury

Health and fitness are important!

- Maintain your general health – have regular reviews with your local doctor. [Click here for information on Your Health – Keep it in Check](#)
- Putting on too much weight can make activities harder. Review your diet or get help from a dietician to look at what you eat
- Keeping the range of movement and flexibility in the joints is very important. This can be done by regular stretching, using your arms in your daily activities and wearing of hand splints that have been recommended



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- Lack of feeling or sensation in your joints can lead to damage that you may not realise, especially if they are put under too much strain. Look at the things that you do and think about doing them differently.
- Keep physically active – this may include sports, swimming, hand-cycling or recreational hobbies such as gardening or even doing the housework. [Click here for information on Physical Activity](#)
- Specific exercises can also be important. You may need help to set up a program
 - Small muscles in your shoulder called the ‘rotator cuff’ keep the joint stable when moving your arm. These can become weak especially if you have pain. Keeping them strong is important.
 - Backwards pushing or rowing movements can strengthen the back part of your shoulders which may have become weaker over time.

Plan ahead!

- Your needs in the future may have a cost so it’s an idea to think ahead about your financial situation. It may be that you will need different types of equipment or extra care
- Try not to think of change as a negative, it is natural to make changes as we get older to keep our quality of life. [Click here for information on It’s all about Change](#)

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