

Spinal Cord Injury Info Sheet

An information series produced by the Spinal Cord Program at GF Strong Rehab Centre.

Female Sexuality and Fertility

Will I be able to get pregnant?

While a man's ability to reproduce depends on spinal nerves, a woman's reproductive abilities are mainly controlled by hormones. Therefore, while it is common that women stop menstruating for several months after their accident, their reproductive ability does not change. Birth control remains an important issue even right after an SCI.

Women with a spinal cord injury who wish to get pregnant have several important things to consider. While their ability to get pregnant has not changed, their SCI may affect their health and lifestyle during pregnancy. Some of the areas to consider are:

- *Transfers and Dressing:* Women typically gain 25 to 35 pounds during pregnancy. This added weight can make dressing, bathing and transfers more difficult. In addition, this added weight may affect balance. Some women find that they need more assistance, especially during the third trimester.
- *Lung Capacity:* As pregnancy progresses, the growing fetus may put extra pressure on the diaphragm. This added stress may make breathing more difficult. Many women find relief by frequently changing their position.
- *Bowel and Bladder:* Increased pressure from the fetus may change bowel and bladder function. For example, women may experience increased frequency of urinary tract infections and may tend to be constipated during pregnancy. Your doctor or nurse may be able to give you suggestions to help you manage these changes.
- *Skin Concerns:* Additional weight may increase your risk of pressure sores. Maintaining skin integrity may require special attention during pregnancy. Some women will ask a friend or partner to help them check their skin if this becomes an awkward task.
- *Medications:* Many prescribed medications (depending on the type of drug and if it crosses the placenta to the baby's circulatory system) and all recreational drugs can be harmful to an unborn baby. For this reason, you may wish to speak with your doctor about any drugs you are taking to determine which are safe during pregnancy.

Will I have to have a C-section?

A vaginal delivery is certainly possible for women with an SCI. In fact, cesarean sections should only be done for obstetrical problems or for uncontrolled autonomic dysreflexia. Women with injuries at T10 and above may not be aware of labour pains, but may feel the start of labour through signs such as abdominal or leg spasms, abdominal or back pain, autonomic dysreflexia vaginal bleeding or “water breaking.” Although the risk of pre-term labour and delivery is small, it is a good idea for women with decreased uterine sensation to talk with their doctor about how to monitor for pre-term labour.

Will I be able to breast-feed?

Positioning your baby to breast-feed may require some planning and assistance depending on your balance and on the amount of arm and hand control that you have. If the level of SCI is T6 or above, milk production may decrease following the first six weeks related to lack of nipple sensation. In these women, nipple stimulation is necessary for continued lactation.

Whether you choose to breast-feed or bottle feed, your baby can still receive the nutritional and emotional requirements he or she needs. Finding a method that suits you and your baby the best is the important thing.

Pregnancy and parenting after an SCI is possible. Finding the support and information you need will help ensure that your pregnancy is safe and rewarding. It is important to find a doctor who has experience with SCI and is able to watch you closely during the entire pregnancy.

Making a list of all of your questions and concerns and talking about them with your doctor will help you make decisions that meet your needs and lifestyle.

There are other resources available to assist you during and after pregnancy. For example, for help with specialized adaptive equipment and/or rehabilitation support call the British Columbia Paraplegic Association, Sexual Health Service or your OT.

Additional Information

If you have any questions or concerns about sexuality and would like to speak to a Sexual Health Clinician please call Clinical Support Services at GF Strong Rehab Centre at (604) 737-6411.

*For more information,
please contact:*

*Spinal Cord Program
GF Strong Rehab Centre
4255 Laurel St
Vancouver, BC V5Z 2G9*

*Tel: 604-734-1313
Toll-Free: 1-866-906-1888
Fax: 604-714-4121*