

Sex and Autonomic Dysreflexia

Autonomic dysreflexia can happen to people with spinal cord injury (SCI) above the T6 level (about the middle of your back) and it is a condition you should be aware of. It occurs when there is some stimulation below the level of your injury that causes part of your nervous system to respond in an uncontrolled way, giving you headaches and sweating. If autonomic dysreflexia occurs and is allowed to continue for a period of time it can be very dangerous for you.

You will recognize autonomic dysreflexia (AD) by these symptoms:

- Pounding headache
- Blurred vision
- Profuse sweating
- Facial flushing
- Nasal congestion or stuffiness
- High blood pressure – you won't be able to feel this

AD can be brought on by specific stimulation in areas below the level of injury. These may include:

- A very full bladder
- Bladder infection
- Bladder or kidney stones
- Being constipated or having a full bowel
- Pressure sores
- Burns
- Ingrown toenails
- Labour and delivery
- Vibro stimulation of the genitals for fertility procedures or sexual stimulation
- Intense sexual activity

Preventing and Treating Autonomic Dysreflexia

If you notice any symptoms of AD you need to try to figure out what is causing the symptoms. If you have a full bladder or bowel you need to empty them so the symptoms will go away. If you don't know what is causing the problem you will need to get help to find out and perhaps to get the condition treated.

Sex and Autonomic Dysreflexia

People with SCI at T6 or above may experience AD with sexual activity.

When AD occurs during sexual activity that activity should be stopped for a few minutes until the symptoms, such as headache and sweating, subside. You can also try another type of sexual stimulation. It is important that you try to find creative solutions instead of stopping all forms of sexual activity.

Sometimes particular positions used for sexual activity can trigger AD. You will need to find different positions to help to avoid AD.

If AD continues to be a problem or is interfering with your sexual life you may want to talk to your doctor about using a medication that you take just before sexual activity to prevent the dysreflexia from happening.

You may want to try a water-soluble lubricant to decrease friction that might be triggering dysreflexia.

Labour and Delivery

During labour and delivery, contractions of the uterus can cause autonomic dysreflexia that can be mistaken for a condition called pre-eclampsia. Pre-eclampsia and autonomic dysreflexia are very different conditions and need to be managed differently by the medical staff. Your doctor will be aware of the need to carefully monitor your blood pressure when you are in labour. You will also need to tell the doctor if you begin experiencing any symptoms of autonomic dysreflexia.

Fertility Procedures for Men

Many men with SCI do not ejaculate. One of the methods used to obtain sperm that can then be used for insemination is vibro-stimulation. When vibro-stimulation is used it can bring on AD. It is recommended that, at least initially, the procedure be conducted under medical supervision with constant blood pressure monitoring. Once your response to the vibro-stimulation has been determined then you may be able to do this at home. In some cases you may be given medication to help minimize the chances of AD.

Not all people with spinal cord injury above T6 will experience AD during sexual activity. Some people may just experience it on rare occasions and some people will never experience it. In the months and years following your injury you will discover how your body responds and how you can use creative solutions to enjoy sex without autonomic dysreflexia.

Medical Disclaimer: The above information is not intended nor implied to be a substitute for professional medical advice. Always ask your physician or other qualified health professional about any matter concerning your individual health.

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For further information: Contact the Sexual Health Rehab Service, GF Strong Rehab Centre