

Healthy eating following spinal cord injury

i Information for patients
Sheffield Dietetics



PROUD TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

SHEFFIELD TEACHING HOSPITALS NHS FOUNDATION TRUST



Why is it important to maintain a healthy diet with a spinal cord injury?

Immobility following spinal cord injury and prolonged periods sitting in a wheelchair can increase the risk of:

- Becoming overweight, which can increase the risk of:
 - Diabetes
 - Coronary heart disease
- Developing pressure ulcers

To help reduce these risks it is important to eat a balanced diet and maintain a healthy weight.

What is a balanced diet?

The diagram opposite shows how a balanced diet is made up. There is no single food that contains all nutrients that the body or skin needs, so eating a variety of foods is important. The diagram shows the ideal amounts of each food group that are needed to ensure all nutrients are provided.

The total intake you need will depend on your weight and activity levels. However, the proportions of foods should remain the same.

Eatwell Guide

Use the Eatwell Guide to help you get a balance of healthier and more sustainable food. It shows how much of what you eat overall should come from each food group.



Water, lower fat milks, sugar-free drinks including tea and coffee all count.
Limit fruit juice and/or smoothies to a total of 150ml a day.

Check the label on packaged foods

Each serving (150g) contains

Energy	3.0g	1.3g	34g	0.5g
fat	LOW	LOW	HIGH	ALD
Carbohydrate	13%	4%	7%	38%
Salt				15%

of an adult's reference intake (RNI)

Typical values (per 100g) per 100g: 180kcal / 167kcal

Choose foods lower in fat, salt and sugars



Per day 2000kcal + 2500kcal = ALL FOOD + ALL DRINKS

Source: Public Health England in association with the Welsh government, Food Standards Scotland and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland. © Crown copyright 2016

The importance of each food group

Fruit and vegetables

These foods provide a variety of vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre. Many contain vitamin C which is important for maintaining healthy skin and helping your body to absorb iron.

Aim to eat 5 portions of fruit and vegetables per day. Try to have a variety; choosing fruit and vegetables that are different colours is a good idea. This is because different colours of foods contain different vitamins and minerals.

Bread and other cereals and potatoes

These include foods such as bread, potatoes, rice, pasta and cereals. They provide energy and B vitamins.

The high fibre types also help to fill you up and maintain good bowel habits.

Aim to have a serving of one of these foods with every meal.

Dairy and alternatives

These foods provide calcium which is important for strong bones and helps prevent osteoporosis (thinning of bones).

Choose low fat types if you are overweight. The low fat dairy products still have all the goodness in them; they just have less fat and less energy.

Meat, fish and alternatives

These include foods such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans, nuts and lentils. These provide protein and minerals, such as iron which your body needs to make healthy blood and muscles.

Try to have a portion from this food group at each meal.

Foods containing fat and sugar

If you are overweight these foods should be kept to a minimum as they are high in calories.

If using spreads/margarine use them in small amounts and choose ones based on olive oil, rapeseed oil and sunflower oil. These are made from polyunsaturated or monounsaturated fat which is healthier for the heart.

A high intake of sugar can lead to weight gain and tooth decay. We do not need sugar for energy. We can get energy from starchy food such as bread and potatoes, which also provide valuable vitamins and minerals. Use sweets, chocolate and biscuits for occasional treats only, and try artificial sweetener in drinks and on cereal.

Do not forget fluid

Fluid is important to help keep the skin elastic and so reduce the risk of developing pressure sores and prevent constipation. You should aim for 2 litres per day (8-10 glasses). This could be any liquid except alcohol.

Avoid drinks that contain sugar if you are overweight.

If you are overweight

It would be better for you to try to reduce your weight to help reduce the risk of developing pressure ulcers.

This is because being overweight can:

- Reduce how mobile you are and make transfers more difficult.
- Increase the weight bearing load through pressure areas and cause damage to the blood supply in that area.
- Increase the risk of developing diabetes, which can severely affect blood circulation.

Aim for gradual weight loss. If you lose weight too quickly it could mean the balance of your diet has been affected and this could increase the risk of developing pressure ulcers.

Here are some simple ideas that you could use to change your diet:

- Swap full fat dairy foods for lower fat options such as semi-skimmed milk or skimmed milk, diet yoghurts, and low fat cheeses.
- Have sugar free drinks or use a sweetener in hot drinks instead of sugar.
- Use low fat cooking methods such as grilling, baking, microwaving and steaming instead of frying.
- Use low fat spread based on monounsaturates or polyunsaturates instead of butter. For example low fat vegetable spreads, low fat olive oil spreads.
- Trim off any visible fat from meat and remove skin from chicken before cooking.

If you are underweight

Being underweight also has health risks especially of developing pressure ulcers.

This is because being underweight can:

- Reduce the padding over bony areas such as the bottom and hips making these areas more likely to develop an ulcer.
- Mean that there are not enough nutrients in your diet to maintain healthy skin.

It may be better for you to increase your weight.

It is important that you maintain the balance of your diet whilst you gain weight. Do not eat fatty or sugary foods at the expense of other more nourishing foods.

Here are some simple ideas that you could use to improve your diet:

- Make sure your diet is varied and contains foods from each of the food groups.
- Check that you are eating regularly and not missing meals. If you are struggling with a poor appetite try and have meals and snacks, little and often.
- Use oils such as olive oil, rapeseed oil and sunflower oil in cooking. These provide extra energy, are good for the heart and won't increase your cholesterol levels.
- Have nourishing snacks between meals such as full fat yoghurts, cheese and crackers, fruit cake. Make sure they do not spoil your appetite for meals.
- You may not always feel like cooking. If you do not, there are a wide variety of tinned, chilled and frozen ready meals available. Frozen or tinned vegetables can also be useful.

Muscle development

Development of muscle mass is only achievable through activity levels and will depend on your level of injury. It is likely that any additional protein your body may need to support any increase in activity will be achieved through a balanced diet. Eating or drinking additional protein above the amount you need is likely to put additional strain on your kidneys and could lead to unwanted increase in body fat.

If you have any further questions about your diet then please do not hesitate to contact your dietitian for further advice.



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