

Ash's Advice: Article 13

By Ashley Moore

March eighteenth of this year marked the seventeenth anniversary of the automobile accident that left me paralyzed from the neck down. After so long, I believe I have living with a spinal cord injury down to a science. Sure, I have my days of not knowing exactly how to live life as a quadriplegic, but overall, I have been blessed with maintaining a healthy lifestyle in my condition. Sadly, many people with spinal cord injuries end up acquiring a few serious medical issues. I have observed the top three health issues most individuals with a spinal cord injury face to be bone loss, weight gain, and skin problems throughout the years.

According to the [Northwest Regional Spinal Cord Injury System](#), "about 80 percent of individuals with chronic spinal cord injuries have either osteopenia or osteoporosis." A spinal cord injury can result in a 30 to 40 percent decrease in bone density, leading to a higher risk of bone fractures. Think about it, people with spinal cord injuries sit in wheelchairs all day while those living without paralysis walk around. Quadriplegics like myself not only spend their days sitting down but rarely move any limb at all. Thankfully, this quadriplegic has not experienced a bone fracture. A daily regimen of stretching my joints' range of motion, a relatively healthy diet, and many vitamin supplements has become my key to success. [The National Spinal Cord Injury Association](#) recommends consuming a healthy diet with a sufficient amount of vitamin D, either from the sun or from a supplement. They also recommend disabled individuals avoid smoking, limit alcohol and caffeine consumption, stay mentally and physically active, and avoid situations that can lead to a fall and consequential bone fracture. Through the years, I have also learned that muscle spasms can maintain the strength of someone's bone mass by causing the muscles to pull on the bones. Physical therapy is also a considerable contributor to healthy bone mass. It is best to come up with a regimen like I have and stick to it.

A second medical issue commonly experienced by individuals with a spinal cord injury involves weight gain. I know what you're thinking. Most physically able Americans struggle with weight gain too. What makes individuals living with a spinal cord injury any different? Paralysis forces individuals with spinal cord injuries to live sedentary lifestyles, which leads to muscle reduction. This reduction in muscle mass leads to decreased metabolic rates and increased fat storage. Even as a quadriplegic who spends twelve or more hours a day out of bed and keeps track of what she eats, I experience the constant up and down of weight fluctuation. Unfortunately, there are not too many studies surrounding weight gain in individuals with a spinal cord injury. However, I believe following the common guidelines of a healthy diet and some form of daily physical therapy makes a huge difference in maintaining a healthy weight, spinal cord injury, or not.

If you have a spinal cord injury and you are reading this, I guarantee you have the experience of feeling concerned about skin breakdown. Skin breakdown occurs when the skin cells do not get enough blood flow due to an individual staying in one position for an extended period. If a disabled individual does not tend to a slight pressure sore fast enough, it can develop into a large sore so deep that the bone becomes exposed. I cannot even begin to estimate how many people I know with a spinal cord injury hospitalized because a pressure sore got out of control. Many people are forced to amputate one of their limbs because of an infected pressure sore.

Thankfully, my pressure sore track record has been pretty much spotless over the years because I follow advice from the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. Now called the [Shirley Ryan Ability Lab](#), they say, "Skin stays healthy with a balanced diet, good hygiene, regular skin checks, and pressure relief." I want to emphasize the guideline to check skin regularly and change positions, not only at night when in bed but also during the day when sitting up in your wheelchair. I truly believe those two actions have been the key to my successful skin health over the years. Most of my wisdom came from the intelligent minds at Jackson Memorial and The Miami Project To Cure Paralysis.