Alcohol Use and Abuse after a Spinal Cord Injury

Alcohol is a drug that affects the brain and spinal cord. It is the most often used drug before and after spinal cord injuries (SCI). A UW Health study showed that 57% of rehabilitation patients between the ages of 16 and 34 were intoxicated at the time they were injured. This guide was written to help you learn more about the harmful effects of alcohol on your body and your life after an SCI.

Bladder
Bladder function is altered for up to 6 hours after you have been drinking. If the bladder isn’t emptied, it can become swollen. If this occurs, you may need to have a catheter placed in your bladder. Alcohol can also dehydrate you. This may lead to bladder and kidney infections as well as low blood pressure.

Prescription Drugs
There can be very harmful and severe side effects when alcohol and other drugs are combined. The effect of the drug can strengthen, or the drug can last too long in your system. Sometimes mixing alcohol with certain drugs (like phenobarbital) can even be deadly.

Self-care
Alcohol tends to lessen your attention span. This can lead to poor self-care. You could be more likely to ignore bladder and bowel needs. You might pay less attention to skin care and forget to perform pressure relief techniques. You will then be at a higher risk for pressure sores.

Function
The healing of your spinal cord can be impaired. Your balance and coordination worsens which can increase the risk of falling out of your wheelchair.

Nutrition
Alcohol is high in calories, but it shouldn’t be used in place of food. It limits how your body absorbs nutrients. Poor eating habits will delay the healing process.

Coping
Alcohol can prevent you from facing the challenges a spinal cord injury brings. It can also make it hard for you to master these challenges. Your relationships with friends and family may be altered as well.

For More Details
If you have concerns or questions about your alcohol use and how it may affect you, please talk with your doctor. Your doctor can answer questions and provide more resources in a private manner.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person’s health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 9/2015 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#5404