

# 6 Recreation and Exercise

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## Foreword

After a spinal cord injury, many people try to do the things that they always did and if physically capable, find new areas of recreation and exercise. Recreation is a great way to let one's mind relax and interact with others. Exercise will help keep us fit and help ward off other medical problems associated with spinal cord injury.

This section is designed merely to identify different types of recreation and exercise available to those with a spinal cord injury. More important is the local directory where contact names and numbers are available for various sports associations and non-profit groups that deal with recreation and exercise for disabled and specifically spinal cord injured people.

Please remember that the information provided in this section is not meant to offer medical advice, but to provide information that will help you discuss this matter with your medical practitioners as well as allow you to seek out more information on these issues.

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## Recreation and Exercise

Recreation and exercise are not always the same things to some people. In fact, there is quite a debate on what distinguishes the two. There are those who feel any sort of exercise is a form of recreation, and those who believe that anything that exerts effort is exercise, no matter how enjoyable it might be.

According to Merriam-Webster's dictionary, recreation is a "refreshment of strength and spirits after work; a means of refreshment or diversion." Essentially, it's a type of play. This could include anything from reading a book, playing a game of chess or going gliding.

Merriam-Webster also defines exercise as "bodily exertion for the sake of developing and maintaining physical fitness." This could include going for a wheel, going to the gym, playing a game of basketball or rugby, or fencing. Exercise can be anything that gets your heart moving, and your body, too.

*"Depending on your level of injury (I'm C4-5), two ways of incorporating exercise into your daily routine are, driving, and typing. I find that these two activities help improve my physical endurance, as well as improving my co-ordination."*

Ryan

### **BENEFITS OF EXERCISE**

- Helps to keep your bones strong
- Helps you to maintain an ideal body weight
- Improves control of blood sugar
- Helps you sleep better
- Helps you feel better about yourself
- Improves your heart and lung function
- Improves blood flow and oxygen delivery to muscles and skin
- Decreases the risk of heart disease
- Improves the body's ability to burn fat
- Provides the body with more energy for daily activities
- Supports good upright posture

### **BENEFITS OF RECREATION**

- Helps improve your health through activity
- Helps you to meet new people
- Helps enhance your outlook on life
- Gives you something to look forward to
- Increases your sense of leisure

## Finding an Activity

*“Find someone (a mentor) who is already well adjusted and realizes how important Recreation & Exercise is. They can help motivate you.”*  
Andrew

There are numerous different outlets for finding an activity. The first place you should start looking is your rehabilitation centre. They are your first contact to other centres and clubs in your area that provide services for disabled people.

Once you're living on your own, a good resource is the Active Living Alliance at <http://www.ala.ca/>. Their mission is to promote active living lifestyles among Canadians with disabilities. They publish an online newsletter called *Activate Yourself* where people with disabilities share their stories on how they became and stayed active.

Two other valuable resources in finding an activity are the Canadian Paraplegic Association and the Ontario March of Dimes. Please be sure to refer to the local directory for contact numbers, as both are extremely useful services.

Your local community centres may also be a great resource, as well as local colleges. Please refer to the local directory for centres in your area.

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## Exercise

Exercise benefits not only our physical state but also our psychological state. In the cases of a SCI, having exercise as part of your daily routine is essential to maximize your abilities and overall health. Be sure to consult your health care practitioner or physician before starting any form of exercise routine.

### TYPES OF EXERCISE

#### **Muscular Strength and Endurance Training**

Muscular strength is the amount of force a muscle can exert, and endurance training defines the number of times or length of time that a muscle can repeatedly exert this force.

*"I was really into sports before I was injured and I wanted to know what was out there for people with disabilities. I was amazed to realize that with a bit of creativity and planning I could still play most of the sports that I used to. I also got involved in several that I never tried before but always wanted to before my injury."*

Anita

### **Cardiorespiratory or Aerobic Conditioning**

Aerobic conditioning helps the function of your heart, lungs and muscles. Continued aerobic training teaches your body to use oxygen more efficiently, thereby improving your physical fitness and ability to work harder.

### **Range of Motion**

Range of Motion refers to the amount of movement you have at each joint. Every joint in the body has a normal range of motion. Joints stay loose by being moved. Range of motion exercise refers to exercises that move your joints through its entire range of motion.

Depending on your level and classification of spinal cord injury, you will have some muscles that are within your voluntary control and some that are not. The muscles above your level of injury should not be impaired, but after your SCI they may be weak due to prolonged bed rest or inactivity.

### **Potential Problems with Loss of Range of Motion**

There are numerous different problems that can arise with a loss in range of motion. These will often show up in what physiotherapists refer to as "predictable patterns." Through research on people with spinal cord injuries, physiotherapists and doctors know what muscles tend to suffer the most and the fastest.

Remaining in a seated position for long periods of time, such as in bed or in your wheelchair, can cause the muscles in the front of the hips and the backs of the knees to shorten. Slouching in your wheelchair can also cause the muscles in your shoulders and neck to tighten. Blankets in your bed can weigh down your toes, and shorten the muscles in the backs of your ankles.

Your physical or occupational therapist will instruct you in how to do your own range of motion exercises. If you are unable to do your exercises by yourself, you will be taught how to guide others to assist you with the exercises.

### **SUMMARY**

Whatever you choose to do with your free time is up to you. The key is to just do it! Don't sit around and wait for an activity, no matter how relaxing or strenuous it may be, to come to you. You need to get out there and do something and continue living.

## RESOURCES

National Center on Physical Activity and Disability Home Page

<http://ncpad.cc.uic.edu>

Online dictionary database

<http://www.dictionary.com/>

Craig Hospital – World renowned specialty rehabilitation hospital, exclusively dedicated to the rehabilitation and research for patients with spinal cord injury and traumatic brain injury.

<http://www.craighospital.org/sci/mets/exercise.asp>

Hammond, Margaret C. & Burns, Stephen C (Ed). Yes You Can! A Guide to Self-Care for Persons with Spinal Cord Injury. Third Edition. Paralyzed Veterans of America, 2000. Chapters 5, 17, 24

Active Living Alliance – Activate yourself!

[http://www.ala.ca/story\\_e.cfm?Story=125](http://www.ala.ca/story_e.cfm?Story=125)

## Terms Encountered in this Section

**aerobic conditioning** – An exercise that increases the need for oxygen.

**cardiorespiratory** – Of or pertaining to or affecting both the heart and the lungs and their functions.

**hypotension** – Abnormally low blood pressure.

**occupational therapist** – A person who assists in the productive or creative activity in the treatment or rehabilitation of physically or emotionally disabled people.

**physical therapist** – A person who helps people with a physical dysfunction or injury by the use of therapeutic exercise and the application of modalities, intended to restore or facilitate normal function or development; also called physiotherapy.

**range of motion exercises** – Activities where during exercises, one extends body parts as far as possible in every direction.

