

Having a COVID-19 Infection With a Spinal Cord Injury Can Cause Serious Breathing Issues

COVID-19

COVID-19 is the name of the infection caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. Coronavirus causes illnesses that affect your lungs making it hard to breathe.

The virus that causes COVID-19 is thought to spread from person to person, mainly through respiratory droplets in the air produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

Having a spinal cord injury (SCI) means you are at higher risk for getting more serious complications from COVID-19 illness. If you develop respiratory issues with COVID-19 you are likely to have more difficulty recovering.

Lungs are Affected by a SCI

People with complete tetraplegia (paralysis of the arms, legs and torso) have the highest rates of respiratory complications from their SCI, followed by incomplete tetraplegia, then paraplegia (paralysis of all or part of the torso and both legs).

There are many sets of muscles that work together for “normal breathing.” They include the diaphragm, intercostal muscles (muscles between the ribs), accessory muscles (muscles of the neck) and abdominal (belly) muscles.

Respiratory muscles receive nerve information from the spinal cord in the same way arm and leg muscles receive nerve information from the spinal cord.

After a SCI, nerve information may be absent (complete SCI) or impaired (incomplete SCI) to these respiratory muscles affecting movement of air in and out of the lungs. This can lead to:

- ineffective or weak cough
- difficulty clearing secretions
- mucus plugging in the lungs
- atelectasis (small section of collapsed lung)
- pneumonia.

To Do List

- Get an influenza shot. (You need to get one every year.)
- Make sure your pneumococcal vaccine is up-to-date.
- Wear a mask any time you are outside of your home.
- If you use PCA services, know their policies for keeping you and their staff healthy.
- Wash your hands often.
- Practice social distancing when you are in the community.
- Call your doctor if you have any signs of COVID-19. Ask about your COVID-19 testing options.
- Read “How to Protect Yourself Against COVID-19 (Coronavirus) When Using a Wheelchair.”