



HEALTH

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AGEING WITH SCI



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younger person's perspective
on ageing with SCI.



THE YOUNGER PERSON'S PERSPECTIVE ON AGEING WITH SCI



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0 ver the past 10 years, a large part of my day-to-day work has focused on the subject of ageing with SCI. Much work has been carried out from the science perspective and the social perspective. It quickly became apparent to me that knowledge gleaned from longitudinal studies on all aspects of ageing with SCI, as well as anecdotal evidence, should be shared with the younger generation.

The life expectancy of SCI people injured in the last 20 years or so has improved greatly. With this in mind, younger people ideally should start thinking long term about the wear and tear and the general effects that an SCI is going to have on their lives.

Ageing is never an easy subject to broach, especially with someone in their 30s or early 40s. I spoke to four people to find out how they feel about ageing and what preventative measures they take, if any, in trying to preserve their body functionality. I was encouraged by the responses I received.



Alex

ALEX
AGE: 29
INJURED: 2013
LEVEL: T6
CAUSE: motorcycle accident

you will receive quicker treatment and have more input from doctors as well as spinal consultants and experts in their field.

While it is important to consider how my daily activities will impact on my long-term functionality, you could plan everything in detail and then get hit by a bus, or learn that you have been doing something incorrectly. I think moderation is important. However, we are only human and tend to overdo it now and then.

I know that pushing in a wheelchair will put greater strain on your shoulders, arms, wrists and hands etc., so it's important to exercise and preserve the muscles used.

I think the minute you are able to sit in a wheelchair you should prepare for ageing. It is important to do so before symptoms of ageing occur.

JAMES
AGE: 39
INJURED: 2001
LEVEL: C5/6 complete
CAUSE: snowboarding accident

Ageing is a slightly depressing prospect but something everyone with or without an SCI has to come to terms with. Having an SCI in my mid-twenties, I didn't really think ageing would come, but now I'm surprised to have almost made it to 40! I can now feel my body telling me to slow down.

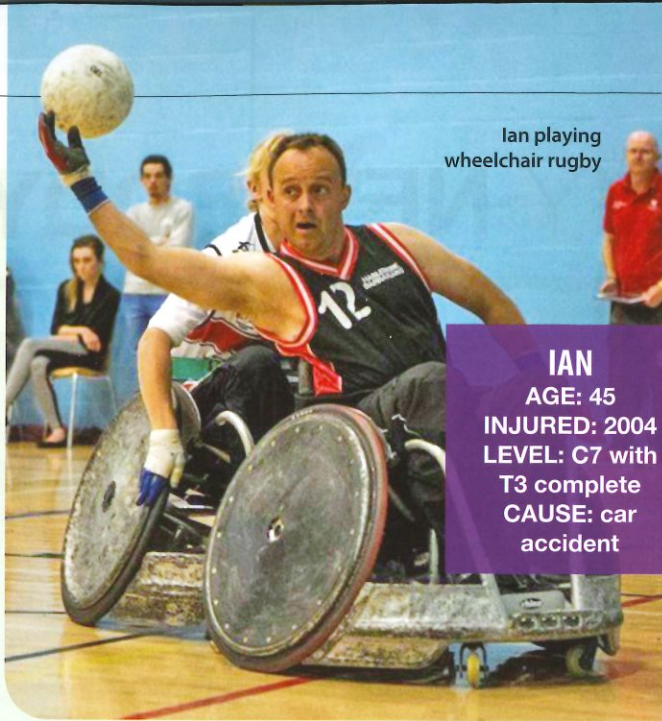
I listen to my body more now, especially when it tells me to slow down or rest more. However, I'm still trying to make the most of life and my lifestyle.

Living with an SCI you learn the importance of posture and seating position to help alleviate pain to upper limb joints. This also helps me to limit spasms.

It's important to reassess your activities as you age. I broke my arm handcycling but I waited until my arm healed before I got back on the bike. I took more caution when cycling after that!

“ I listen to my body more now, especially when it tells me to slow down or rest. ”

Ageing for me means that you will progress in life to a greater sum. Your bones will become more fragile with time and you will become more at risk of pressure sores and skin damage. Your immune system will also slowly become weaker but these things will happen to everyone, regardless of SCI. Having an SCI might mean that



Ian playing wheelchair rugby

IAN
AGE: 45
INJURED: 2004
LEVEL: C7 with T3 complete
CAUSE: car accident

I've played wheelchair rugby since 2006 and am now chairman of a newly-formed club based at Stoke Mandeville.

I wasn't expecting to get an SCI but ageing doesn't worry me. There is a certain inevitability of wear and tear on the shoulders but, if they do start to play up, this is something I will have to deal with.

It could be argued that by using my arms more by playing rugby (and pushing marathons as I have done), I'm using my shoulders more and harder than nature intended. However, my muscles are stronger as a result of the exercise I do, which helps protect my shoulder joints.

In order to protect my upper limbs, I keep my weight down to make it safer and easier to transfer.

I will adapt my levels of activity when I start to experience increased levels of pain. For me, it's a balance between the mental wellbeing that I get from sport and physical fitness, and the offset of potential long-term damage. Right now it's a gamble I'm willing to take.

ALI
AGE: 43
INJURED: 1996
LEVEL: T12 complete
CAUSE: struck by tree in wind storm

However, I am aware that as I age, these activities cause additional strain on my upper body as my arms and shoulders were not designed to be used to this extent.

As a result, I can foresee that at some point in the future, I may need assistance with transferring and/or my personal care needs. I will probably become less independent and possibly less confident in my abilities as I get older.

I have lived with SCI for 20 years and it is only now that I am considering these long-term effects, as 'independence' was drummed into me during my rehabilitation in my 20s and, like many people, I do not feel as old as my actual age.

Only recently have I started to consider how my daily activities will impact on my long-term functionality. I recently experienced severe pain in my left arm/shoulder and for a while it inhibited my strength and ability to transfer. It made me

realise that these episodes may become more frequent, more severe, and longer lasting as time goes by.

I have become more aware of how much exercise I am taking part in and am trying to increase the amount of low impact exercise to maintain my strength. In the future, I would also consider taking nutritional supplements/remedies to assist in keeping my joints and muscles healthy – maybe I should consider this now!

It is difficult to know and/or accept when you need to adapt levels of activity. The most appropriate time, I think, would be when activities are starting to cause discomfort or pain. In reality, it is still difficult to come to terms with the notion that your lifestyle needs to change as you age, irrespective of whether you live with a disability or not. No-one wants to get to the stage where an injury forces them to adapt, but in unforeseen circumstances, this can be the case.

It is difficult to imagine being an elderly person, and even more so with the physical limitations that result from SCI. I am fortunate in that I am currently independent in an accessible environment. As a paraplegic, I am self-caring and am able to transfer from, and into, my wheelchair. I can self-propel my wheelchair and dismantle it and lift it in and out of the car, enabling me to drive a 'regular' car fitted with hand controls.



Ali

SUMMARY

Experiencing pain or an injury, whilst playing sport or during an everyday activity, needs to be offset with rest or maybe additional medication as advised by your GP or spinal consultant.

Accepting that living life to the full with an SCI is a fine balance, is evident. A philosophical but realistic approach to ageing with an SCI helps to keep this balance. Equally important is a good understanding of the effects of taking part in demanding sports or other activities, over time, on the upper limbs. Taking the necessary preventative measures such as keeping your weight steady and listening to your body, may allow you to enjoy your activities for as long as you desire.