



# CARE OF THE BLADDER AND KIDNEYS IN LATER LIFE

The correct and consistent management of your bladder is an essential part of life after SCI. It should become second nature, but no matter how meticulous you are, there will be complications such as urinary tract infections (UTIs) and other kidney issues.



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## THE BLADDER

The ageing bladder loses a degree of tone and elasticity, which can interfere with its ability to store urine. There is an increased risk of UTIs, in part because you may experience residual urine (where the bladder does not fully empty). UTIs are a common cause of hospital admission with the SCI population and this can disrupt both your work and social life. Chronic UTIs can lead to more serious complications such as the formation of bladder and kidney stones and, in extreme cases, kidney failure. Reducing the number of UTIs you get by finding and treating the root cause should be a priority.

## HOW TO KEEP YOUR BLADDER HEALTHY

- An effective bladder management routine:** establishing and maintaining a routine that works for you will help to prevent infections and other complications and help your life run smoothly.
- Cleanliness and correct technique:** if you think you have developed bad habits you can get in touch with your SCI Centre for advice, or read SIA's *Bladder Management* factsheet. It is important that you ask your carers and family members to practice an effective cleanliness regime around you.
- Food and supplements:** certain foods help to keep your bladder healthy including natural yogurt, celery, watermelon, parsley, garlic, asparagus, cucumber, cranberries, blueberries and citrus fruit (especially if you are aiming to keep your urine slightly acidic to restrict the growth of bacteria).
- Cranberry juice/tablets:** there are strong feelings for and against the use of cranberry in the prevention and treatment of UTIs. NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) has recently published its findings and concluded: "There is not enough good evidence to recommend it." This issue has become very personal to some individuals, with reports that using cranberry, in either tablet form or juice, has been beneficial, especially when the early signs of an infection occur.
- Vitamin C:** found naturally in food and in supplements, vitamin C makes the urine slightly more acidic, which helps prevent infections.
- Probiotics:** these are live micro-organisms, for which it is claimed there are various health benefits, including boosting the immune system. They are added to foods such as yoghurt.
- D-Mannose:** this is a naturally-occurring sugar that has become popular within the SCI community as a means to help prevent bladder infections. Again, the jury is very much out in terms of its effectiveness. There is no official scientific evidence to prove it has any benefit.
- Echinacea:** this herb is taken to prevent colds over the winter because of its ability to increase the number of white blood cells produced by the body, thereby helping to fight infection.
- Fluid intake:** the recommendation for people living with SCI is two-to-three litres of water per day, as this will flush out the bladder and kidneys. Other drinks might include juices, but you should be aware that concentrated juice contains a lot of sugar, which causes the kidneys to work hard. Also, too much tea, coffee or alcohol can act as an irritant. Everyone has individual needs, so you should seek advice if you are unsure as to what is a healthy amount of fluid for you.
- Exercise:** you should exercise as best you can and as regularly as you can. Regular use of a standing frame has many benefits, including aiding kidney function, helping to maintain blood pressure and improving circulation.



It also helps to open internal cavities, giving internal organs more space and reduces the severity of osteoporosis.

- **Immune system:** a healthy immune system helps to protect you against infections. Over-use of antibiotics can contribute to the destruction of good bacteria in the gut and this can weaken your immune system. Make sure your diet contains enough immune-boosting nutrients, such as garlic, vitamins A and C and the mineral zinc.
- **Health check-ups:** these should take place preferably at your SCI Centre or a district general hospital. Regular urological check-ups will help to detect the early formation of bladder stones and early signs of bladder cancer. To reduce your risk of bladder stones you must drink sufficient fluids and keep your urine slightly acidic.
- **Positive mindset:** recognising when your routine is no longer fit for purpose, you will need to change the way you manage your bladder.
- **Vigilance:** report any changes to your GP or spinal consultant, within weeks rather than months.

**Before you add supplements to your diet, it would be wise to seek advice from your GP or a dietitian.**

## ANTIBIOTICS

The overuse of antibiotics is now a cause of great concern and some people are keen to reduce the number of times they use them to treat UTIs. The more times you take antibiotics, the more at risk you are of building up resistance to them, thereby encouraging more infections to develop. It can become a vicious cycle. You can ask your GP to provide you with a 'back up' course of antibiotics, especially if you are susceptible to frequent infections.

## URINE

Your urine should be pale and almost colourless and odourless. If you are advised to keep your urine slightly acidic, this can be achieved by eating citrus fruit. If it turns a dark colour then you are probably not drinking enough. Report any major changes to your GP.

## THE KIDNEYS

It is easy to forget the importance of your kidneys, but they work continuously to filter the blood that passes through them to rid the body of waste products, producing urine. The kidneys' other functions include helping to regulate blood pressure and helping to balance the body's fluid levels.

## References

Smith, J. and James, K. (2013). *Eat Well, Live Well with Spinal Cord Injury*. PVA Publications.

## HOW TO HELP KEEP THE KIDNEYS HEALTHY

### DIET

- Avoid too much red meat and foods that are high in fat and salt.
- Include plenty of green vegetables.
- Maintain a healthy and steady weight.

### LIFESTYLE

- Avoid smoking.
- Be aware of certain medications such as painkillers and heartburn drugs, which make the kidneys work hard. Long-term unsupervised use can be harmful, so check with your GP if you are buying over-the-counter drugs for pain and heartburn.
- Have your blood pressure checked to see if you need monitoring regularly.

## WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS FOR DEVELOPING KIDNEY STONES?

- Not drinking enough water.
- Chronic bladder infections.
- Some people produce both bladder and kidney stones more naturally.
- Certain chronic medical conditions.
- Not attending regular health check-ups.

## REFLUX

Reflux occurs when urine flows back up to the kidneys – this can dramatically increase the risk of UTIs, causing swelling of the abdomen, nausea and rising blood pressure. It is important not to overfill the bladder and to ensure it is emptied properly. Chronic untreated reflux can cause infection to spread to your kidneys.

## BEING VIGILANT

- Report any changes, especially if you see blood in your urine.
- Have regular health check-ups, including urodynamic tests.

## THE BIGGER PICTURE

A healthy and well-functioning urinary system not only gives peace of mind, but also improves self-esteem, gives you confidence in the workplace and allows you to conduct your social life without fear of accidents.

## SUPPORT

Build good relationships with staff at your SCI Centre, a neurology consultant, community nurses, continence specialist nurses (employed by your GP surgery) and a nutritionist who understands the needs of SCI people.



### Further reading and information

- SIA's Advice Line, Message Board and *Bladder Management* factsheet.
- Use reliable websites, such as Patient UK and NHS Choices.