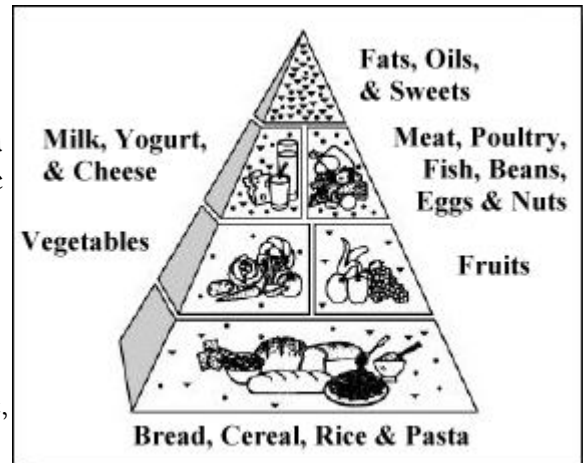


The importance of nutrition for the SCI patient

People often wonder why good nutrition is important, especially to a spinal cord injured person. Although basic nutrition from all the food groups is vital, it's even more essential when the body is injured, since the body needs more nutrients to repair wounds, rebuild muscles, and fight infections.

During rehabilitation, your body is better able to perform if the needed nutrients are available in your daily meals. To receive all these important nutrients, you need to eat a wide variety of foods every day from each of the basic five food groups shown.

Often, spinal cord injured patients enter rehabilitation with weight loss and depressed protein stores due to stress and trauma. When the body has been severely injured it begins to breakdown its own muscle. Therefore, the body's need for protein and calories may be greatly increased during the early phase of injury requiring the need for high protein and high calorie supplements such as milkshakes, sandwiches, and pudding. Complete protein is found in animal sources such as meat, milk, cheese and eggs.



Unfortunately, these increased needs occur at a time when it may be difficult to eat well because of anxiety, pain, or depression. In severe cases, tube feeding may be necessary if meals and snacks are not providing enough calories and protein. This is almost always a temporary measure.

Once the process of building tissue begins and your body has passed through the stress and injury phase, your weight will need to be monitored closely to prevent excess weight gain. Your ideal weight can be calculated using a formula.

Weight calculation:

- Men = 106 lbs. for first 5 ft. + 6 lbs. for each inch over 5 ft.
- Women = 100 lbs. for first 5 ft. + 5 lbs. for each inch over 5 ft.

However, it is recommended that you maintain your weight slightly below the usual ideal body weight to make transfers and self-care activities easier.

Paraplegics should weigh 5-10 % below the previous guidelines, while quadriplegics should weigh 10-15 % below these guidelines.

Example

- 5 feet, 6 inch paraplegic female

100 lbs (for first 5 feet)

+30 lbs (5 lbs x 6 inches)

130 lbs ideal body weight for average female

- To calculate the ideal body weight for a paraplegic female multiply 5 % times 130 lbs

$$\begin{array}{r} 130 \text{ lbs ideal body weight for average female} \\ \times .05 \text{ (5\%)} \\ \hline 6.5 \text{ lbs} \end{array}$$

- Now, subtract 6.5 lbs from 130 lbs

$$\begin{array}{r} 130 \text{ lbs} \\ - 6.5 \text{ lbs} \\ \hline 123.5 \text{ lbs} = 5\% \text{ below the ideal body weight} \end{array}$$

- To calculate for 10 % multiply 10 % times 130 lbs.

$$\begin{array}{r} 130 \text{ lbs} \\ \times .10 \text{ (10\%)} \\ \hline 13 \text{ lbs} \end{array}$$

- Now subtract 13 lbs from 130 lbs

$$\begin{array}{r} 130 \text{ lbs} \\ - 13 \text{ lbs} \\ \hline 117 \text{ lbs} = 10\% \text{ below the ideal body weight} \end{array}$$

- The ideal body weight then for a 5' 6" paraplegic female is between 117 lbs to 123.5 lbs.

It's necessary to maintain a desirable weight not just for ease in transfers and enhanced self-care activities, but also to reduce the incidence of pressure sores. If you don't have enough padding, the pressure of your bones will cause the skin to breakdown, especially if you can't change positions often. Also, too much weight makes it harder for you to move around so your skin gets red and sore from constant contact. Moisture collection between your skin folds can also lead to problems.

In fact, your weight is a factor where too much or too little will just not do! Improper weight can effect function, recreational and career opportunities, independence, and quality of life.

To maintain ideal weight, join in group activities and hobbies, as well as regular exercise, to occupy your time so you won't think about food. Most importantly a sensible diet, unlike exercise, is something every person with SCI can achieve. Cut back on fat and simple sugars such as those found in bacon, gravy, soda, candy, and alcohol. Drinking plenty of water also helps to make you feel full so you eat less. But, excessive use of fruit drinks can lead to weight gain among SCI survivors who have been taught to push fluids. If you drink quarts of cranberry or any other juice every day you're getting a concentrated dose of calories. The point is not to cut down on fluids, just on those loaded with calories.

Your caloric needs are already lowered by your SCI and lack of exercise, so eating only one meal a day or fasting can make the problem worse. The result is your body will burn fewer calories and store more fat in your body in anticipation of reduced intake. Instead eat two or three small meals a day.

The recommended consumption of fluid is 2 or 3 quarts, or 8 to 12 cups, per day. This, along with eating foods high in fiber, can usually achieve a satisfactory bowel program. However, sometimes medication may be necessary to soften the stool.

To increase your fiber intake, choose fresh fruits with edible skins and seeds, raw vegetables, legumes, starchy cooked vegetables (corn, peas, potatoes with skins), breads and cereals that list whole grain, whole wheat, whole meal, stone ground, rye flour, bran or rolled oats as their first ingredients, and snack on nuts and seeds. But, keep in mind that nuts and seeds are also high in calories.

Remember what you eat does make a difference in how you look and feel. The nutrients needed by your body are team players, each depending upon the other. So start building your team now by eating foods from the five food groups, limiting your intake of foods high in fat and sugar, eating high fiber foods, and drinking plenty of low calorie fluids. Eating right from the start can avoid excessive weight gain in years to come.