

Safety

To succeed at living independently as a spinal cord injured person, you must become aware of hazards around you. Your home, your car, even the weather can present dangers. You must learn to compensate for the loss of skin sensation by using your eyes, sense of smell, and knowledge to recognize potential hazards and avoid them. Education and development of a "sixth sense" are the key factors in creating a safe living area.

In the kitchen, the most common hazards are hot liquids and grease. Both can cause serious burns. These can be prevented by using a long plastic apron, wooden handles on pots, and pot holders. Never reach over hot front stove burners. You can easily spill or catch your clothing on pan handles or burn yourself. Working from a sitting position takes some practice. Purchase a stove with controls on the front and install a tilted mirror so you can easily see into your pans. Never carry cups containing hot liquids between your legs or on your lap. They can spill and burn you and you would not feel it. Believe it or not, it has happened! Instead, always use a cart or lap board. Most importantly, plan your work and don't rush.



Another area in the home where safety is important is the bathroom. The hazards here are hot water and slippery floors and tubs. Cover exposed hot water pipes with insulation available at any hardware store. Always adjust the water temperature before getting into the tub or shower. Don't change the temperature once you get in.

Always let the tub empty before you get out, and dry yourself completely. Remember, both you and the tub are slippery when wet. Use grab rails and be sure they are securely anchored. Make sure the chair's wheels are locked with the front wheels facing forward. Have someone help you transfer from tub to chair until you can do it by yourself without difficulty.

Electrocution can be prevented by replacing frayed electrical cords. Don't place electric appliances where they can be knocked into the water. Never plug in appliances while your hands are wet or while you're in the tub.

The most common danger in the bedroom is falling out of bed. To avoid this problem, the bed should be placed against the wall or wheels locked before transferring. If a Hoyer lift or trapeze is used, check to make sure it is working correctly. Once in bed, put the rails up before turning. If someone is helping you turn, always roll toward him or her.

Don't use heating pads, electric blankets, or hot water bottles even on areas where you do have sensation. They could easily slip and burn an area without sensation.

Never smoke in bed! Install smoke detectors and check their operation regularly.

The automobile is another area where safety is important. Seat belts, shoulder restraints, and head rests decrease the chance that an accident will cause head, spine, or internal injuries.

Burns can be prevented by wearing shoes and clothing to protect you from hot upholstery, and the car's heater. A sheepskin cover can also be used. Avoid resting your arm on the car door or touching

any metal surfaces in hot weather. An air conditioned car or van will reduce the chance of heat stroke. And for general safety, have your car or van serviced regularly.

The weather also requires some extra safety measures. Hot weather invites heat stroke in high paraplegics and most quadriplegics because sweating is reduced, impairing heat loss. This makes it difficult to maintain normal body temperature. Prevention of heat stroke includes staying out of the sun during the hottest part of the day (11:00 am to 2:00 pm), avoiding heavy exertion, and increasing fluid intake. If the heat becomes unbearable, take tepid (lukewarm) baths and use air-conditioning. The symptoms of heat stroke are headache, blurred or fuzzy vision, dizziness, nausea, flushed dry skin, and rapid pulse.

Frostbite results from over exposure to cold weather. Early symptoms include slight swelling, redness, and peeling skin. To avoid frostbite, dress warmly and keep the feet and hands warm and covered. See your doctor immediately if you suspect frostbite.

In conclusion, make a habit of the safety practices discussed here. While consciously following these guidelines, you will be developing a "sixth sense" of safety.