

Menstruation after Spinal Cord Injury

After a spinal cord injury (SCI), menstrual periods can stop for a time because of the shock from the injury. Amenorrhea is the term used to describe the temporary stop of your monthly cycle if you are not pregnant or in menopause. Menstrual periods will usually start again within three to six months after your SCI. Once your period does return, the length of your cycle, how heavy it is and how long it lasts usually remain the same as your pre-injury cycle. If your cycle has changed from before your injury, you might need to use a calendar or App to track your cycle.

You might find you have the following symptoms during your period:

- fatigue,
- abdominal cramping,
- low back discomfort or
- leg swelling

This could be similar to what you had before your spinal cord injury.

Some menstrual problems that may happen because of your injury are:

- Bladder spasms
- Autonomic symptoms (sweating, flushing, headaches, or goose bumps)
- Muscle spasms.

If your level of injury is T6 complete or above, you might have autonomic dysreflexia (AD) because of pre-menstrual pain and cramps (also known as pre-menstrual syndrome PMS). AD can also feel the same as PMS symptoms. AD might happen when you put in or remove a tampon. Once the tampon is in place, the symptoms will go away. Other reasons for AD could be the tampon has dropped down, is overly full or there are pressure areas from pad or brief.

Ways to manage your period

Tampons

Depending on your level of injury and functional ability, you might want to use tampons. You also might need some help from a care provider or family member to insert and remove it.



Contact your Doctor or Nurse for more information.

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Using tampons might be a better option for keeping your skin dry. Your level of function will determine if you need help with self-care and if you can change a tampon while sitting up in wheelchair or you need to transfer back to bed. Tampons usually do not move or come out when you transfer.

Because of change in sensation, it will be hard to know if there is leaking or if the tampon was inserted right. You might need to wear a pad along with a tampon on heavy days. You will need to change your tampon more often than before your injury. Changing the tampon more frequently can also help to avoid AD. Toxic shock syndrome is a dangerous illness caused by not changing tampons often enough.

Tampons can make intermittent or indwelling catheterization a little cleaner during your period—there is less leakage and clean up to do, which can help avoid bladder infections.

Pads

You might find it is easier to use a sanitary or reusable pad if you have limited hand function. A pad may be easier to add to your underwear.



Using pads with wings will help keep the pad in place during transfers and weight shifting.

Check regularly for signs of skin irritation and pressure marks between your legs caused by the pad. Keep your skin clean and dry to prevent skin breakdown.

Position the pad evenly and back towards your anus, as blood tends to flow in that direction when seated. Similar to sanitary pads, you might wear incontinence pads, briefs or pull-ups during your period.

Period panties

Period panties look like regular underwear. They are designed to keep moisture away from your skin as they soak up menstrual blood. The fabric in period underwear works to keep blood from leaking onto your clothes. Check for signs of pressure areas where seams meet the skin.



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Menstrual Cups

Menstrual cups are a flexible silicone cup. Insert the cup into the vagina up around the cervix to collect blood. Empty the cup in the toilet after removing it. Full hand function will make it easier to remove the cup and empty into the toilet.



The menstrual cup may not be the best solution if you catheterize from your chair. The angle needed to get the cup out and the risk of spilling makes this hard for some people.

There are devices and products available online to help you manage your period. Talk with your health care provider.

You might choose not to get your monthly period at all and want to try implantable birth control (IUD) or oral contraceptives (the pill). Each of these options could have side effects for you after SCI. Talk to your physiatrist, gynecologist or primary care physician about the best option for you.

Bladder care

You will still manage your bladder in the same way, make sure to wipe your vaginal area clean.

If you have an indwelling catheter, it will be hard to fit a thicker sanitary pad around the catheter. You can try cutting the pad down the middle so the catheter tube can fit more easily around it. There can be a higher incidence of pressure sores on the labia from indwelling catheters during your period.

Fertility

Fertility and pregnancy is very possible after having a SCI. Once your regular menstrual cycle returns, it is still possible to get pregnant. Your fertility has not changed, so birth control is still required. Your health care team can help you with what the best birth control option is for you.

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