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# Understanding Spinal Cord Disease

The spinal cord is a vital part of your nervous system. It relays messages between the brain and body. Problems with the spinal cord can cause a loss of sensation and movement. Spinal cord injury (SCI) is often due to injury, such as a car accident. But injury isn't the only cause of damage to the spinal cord. Certain illnesses and conditions can also cause it. These are known as spinal cord disorders. This sheet outlines the most common types of spinal cord disorders.

## Diseases of the spinal cord

Some conditions can affect the spinal cord and stop it from working normally. The main types are listed below.

- **Infections and inflammation.** The spinal cord may be damaged by inflammation (myelitis). Or the tissue around the cord may be inflamed (meningitis or arachnoiditis). Viruses, such as HIV and West Nile virus, can cause spinal cord disease. The polio virus can lead to other spinal cord problems, often years after the infection. In rare cases, a pocket of infection (abscess) pressing on the spinal cord can cause damage. Lyme disease and syphilis are other important infections that can damage the spinal cord.
- **Autoimmune diseases.** These are conditions where the body attacks and damages its own tissues. Lupus and multiple sclerosis (MS) are two examples. The nervous system can be affected. This can include the spinal cord. A loss of movement and function can result.
- **Tumors.** These are abnormal growths of tissue. They may be cancer or not cancer. Any tumor on or near the spinal cord can press on nerves. This can cause loss of movement, bladder function, and feeling. In some cases, taking out the tumor may be difficult. This is because of the risk of damage to the spinal cord.
- **Spinal stenosis.** This is when the bone, ligaments, and discs make the spinal canal smaller. This causes the spinal cord or spinal nerves to be compressed. The nerves may become permanently injured.
- **Vascular malformations.** These are abnormal blood vessels (arteries and veins) that can press on the spinal cord. They may also prevent oxygen from reaching the spinal cord.
- **Degenerative diseases.** These are conditions where body tissues and systems break down and cause loss of function. One example is amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS or Lou Gehrig disease). ALS causes a death of nerve cells over time. This causes muscles to waste. This leads to severe problems with movement, breathing, and other functions.
- **Nutritional disorders.** Lack of certain vitamins and minerals, such as vitamin B-12, vitamin E, and copper, can cause injury to the spinal cord.
- **Hereditary disorders.** These are genetic disorders that run in families. Some disorders are seen at birth. Others don't cause problems until later in life.

## Coping with a spinal cord disease

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People with spinal cord disorders have many of the same concerns as people with SCI. Many people with a spinal cord disorder can benefit from self-care and lifestyle information given to people with SCI.