

Orthostatic Hypotension

What is orthostatic hypotension?

- Orthostatic hypotension is a drop in blood pressure when a person sits or stands up from a flat or reclined position. People with SCI are more likely to develop this problem.
- When a person sits up or stands, the muscles and nervous system usually react to prevent a drop in blood pressure by contracting the blood vessel walls and muscles, and by pushing fluid in the arms and legs towards the heart.
- In people with SCI, moving from lying to sitting or standing leads to blood collecting in the legs due to gravity, muscle weakness, and poor control of the circulatory system. This causes a drop in blood pressure along with symptoms, such as dizziness, lightheadedness, nausea, seeing stars, ringing in the ears, numbness in the face, or even fainting.

How can I prevent orthostatic hypotension?

- Know your usual blood pressure, which will often be lower after SCI. It is important to have a blood pressure cuff at home and know how to use it.
- When getting up from a lying position, do it slowly.
- Compression stockings, elastic leg wraps, and abdominal binders can help prevent orthostatic hypotension. Learn how to correctly measure for compression stockings and apply elastic wraps. (Note that standing as recommended in the resources may not be possible).
 - Images: http://www.compressionstockings.com/how_to_measure.php
 - Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SZM9kOS44A>
- Talk to your health care provider about the correct amount of fluid you should be drinking.
- Medications can help prevent orthostatic hypotension, and some people will need to take this daily.
 - Examples include: midodrine, pseudoephedrine, fludrocortisone

How can I treat orthostatic hypotension?

If you feel the symptoms of orthostatic hypotension with getting up, you should:

- Lie back down and elevate your legs if you are still in bed.
- Perform a tilt-back or recline for a few minutes if you are sitting in your wheelchair then slowly tilt-up again.
- You may need medications to help prevent another episode, and the medications may take time to be effective.

Will I have to deal with orthostatic hypotension forever?

- Orthostatic hypotension is most severe during the first few months after SCI.
- Over time, most people's bodies will adjust so that changing position will no longer cause a large blood pressure drop, and the symptoms of orthostatic hypotension usually improve.
- Some patients will continue to experience orthostatic hypotension long-term and will need to incorporate management techniques into their daily routine.

Disclaimer: This information is not meant to replace the advice from a medical professional. You should consult your health care provider regarding specific medical concerns or treatment.

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Resources for Health Care Providers

University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, et al. (n.d.). Orthostatic Hypotension-PCP Information.

Retrieved from <http://www.uab.edu/medicine/pcp-sci/oh>

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