



Craig Hospital

Redefining Possible for People with Spinal Cord and Brain Injuries

Provided as a courtesy of
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Optimal Health: What it is and how to get it

You are over your rehab and are reaching a level of health that you feel good about. How do you keep healthy? What does being healthy mean, considering your spinal cord injury? Here are some ideas about what optimal health means and what you can do to keep healthy for a long, long time.

What is optimal health?

If we asked a group of people this question, their responses would be quite different. Some would say physical health is the key. To them, athletic skills or physical abilities might be what matter most. Others might view good health in terms of relationships and maintaining social interactions. Still others believe that emotional health and intellectual challenges are most important. We are all very different and complex persons. We grow and change as different challenges, problems or needs become a part of our lives.

But how do we continue to grow – and keep in good health – in the presence of a disability like spinal cord injury? In recent years, health-care professionals agree that health is not merely "freedom from disease" or disability, but that it includes life's physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual aspects as well. It's not just medical self-care and treatment of health problems that promote optimal health; it's increasing potential as well. Here then are five areas that make up your overall health.

Five areas of health:

Physical health

Relates to your body, and includes eating habits, exercise, medical self-care and treatment of health problems. Smoking, drugs, and alcohol use have potential negative affects on your health.

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Emotional health

Refers to your state of mind. It is how you react to day-to-day stresses, your sense of worth, and your ability to relax and enjoy leisure.

Social health

It's the ability to keep healthy interactions with friends, family, neighbors or co-workers.

Spiritual Health

Includes having a sense of purpose in life, the ability to give and receive love and the ability to feel goodwill toward others.

Intellectual health

Results from the mental stimulation and development we get through our work, school, community service, hobbies, or cultural pursuits.

How to promote optimal health

Promoting optimal health in any or all of these areas may mean changing your lifestyle. Yet, choosing and sticking with healthy behaviors is tricky. With a spinal cord injury, even more roadblocks may impede the journey. Coping issues, wheelchair inaccessibility, inadequate health coverage for general and disability-related health care needs, and trouble staying physically fit with paralysis are just a few of the challenges people with spinal cord injuries face.

What can you do?

- *Physical health*
 - Follow good health practices and seek regular medical follow-up
 - Stop smoking
 - Eat a balanced diet
 - Maintain the best body weight for your height and age
 - Reduce alcohol consumption and keep track of the variety of medications you use daily
 - Get regular exercise as allowed by your level of SCI
 - If you have a high level SCI, you might consider:
 - Working on neck and/or shoulder strengthening
 - Working on diaphragmatic breath control
 - Taking voice and/or singing lessons

- *Intellectual health:*
 - Read books and the newspaper regularly; if necessary, look into adapted page turners
 - Attend lectures and programs
 - Decrease time watching TV
 - Explore at your local library
 - Learn computer skills
 - Learn from public library or college library audio and video tapes
 - Explore volunteer possibilities

- *Spiritual health:*
 - Explore forms of and set time aside each day for meditation and/or prayer
 - Attend a spiritual or religious meeting
 - Read a spiritual book or lesson
 - Select a valued personal characteristic (patience, forgiveness or compassion) and develop it
 - Journal or write an account of your daily life, feelings and thoughts

- *Emotional health:*
 - Learn to recognize your feelings and express them
 - Accept compliments or praise graciously
 - Seek professional help for serious adjustment problems
 - Relieve tension with relaxation and leisure activities
 - Learn how to cope with and adapt to stress
 - Learn relaxation and stress management techniques

- *Social health:*
 - Show more affection toward loved ones
 - Be less critical of others
 - Express your feelings
 - Help educate others about what disability is – and is not – about
 - Fulfill responsibilities to others
 - Learn relaxation strategies
 - Learn effective communication and other life skills

Good News!

The good news is that health care providers are getting better at supporting you in your journey to optimal health. Find a provider who is experienced in working with spinal cord injury survivors and in whom you have confidence. Seek out the information that you need to improve your health in all five areas of life.

Finally. . . .

Persons with SCI – and everyone else – can develop a healthy life by learning to:

- Adapt and manage life experiences
- Use healthy self-care strategies in all of life
- Develop coping strategies that reduce stress
- Relate to others assertively and flexibly
- Examine and adjust beliefs and practices to maintain a healthy life
- Seek positive challenges

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