



# Autonomic Dysreflexia

Autonomic dysreflexia is a condition that commonly affects people with SCI at or above T6.

## What is it?

- Autonomic dysreflexia is caused by a sensation below the level of the spinal cord injury that would normally be painful or noxious. This leads to the excessive reflex activity in the autonomic nervous system. If the cause of the dysreflexia is not found and treated, blood pressure can rise to dangerously high levels which, if untreated, can lead to death.

## Who gets it?

It occurs in people with SCI above T6.

## What are the signs and symptoms?

- Sudden rise in blood pressure – always present.

Everyone reacts differently to an episode of dysreflexia. Some of the things you might notice:

- Blurred vision or seeing spots
- Flushing/blotching of skin above spinal injury level
- Sweating above spinal injury level
- Goose bumps
- Chills without fever
- Nasal stuffiness
- Shortness of breath and anxiety
- Very slow pulse.

## What are the common causes?

### Bladder

- Distended bladder; blocked catheter or urinary bag, or urinary tract infection.

### Bowel

- Constipation, faecal impaction, rectal irritation, haemorrhoids.

### Skin

- Pressure areas, burns, ingrown toenails, tight clothing.

## Other

- Any irritating stimulus including fractures, sexual activity, kidney stones, induced labour, period pain, distended stomach, peptic ulcer.

## What is the treatment?

### 1. Initial action

If you think you might have autonomic dysreflexia but are not sure:

- Sit up and lower the legs – this helps to lower your blood pressure
- Look for the cause
- Loosen tight clothing.

If possible get assistance and have someone check your blood pressure.

### 2. Bladder

- If you self-catheterise – pass a catheter and empty the bladder
- Check that your catheter is not blocked or kinked, or that your leg bag is not over-full
- Empty leg bag
- If necessary change the catheter; use an anaesthetic jelly to numb the area first.

### 3. Bowel

- Manual evacuation may be needed if you suspect that you may be constipated
- You may use an anaesthetic jelly to numb the area first.

### 4. Further treatment

- If your symptoms do not settle quickly or if the cause cannot be found, take the recommended dose of the medication you have been prescribed for autonomic dysreflexia.
- Glyceryl trinitrate (GTN) is a medication normally prescribed to treat chest pain associated with a reduced oxygen supply to the heart muscle (angina). The medication works by causing widening of the major arteries thereby reducing the blood pressure. This drug is also used for treating the elevated blood pressure associated with the life-threatening condition of autonomic dysreflexia, experienced by people with SCI at or above the T6.

*Autonomic Dysreflexia is a medical emergency that requires immediate attention*



➔ GTN is available in the following forms:

1. **Nitrolingual pumpspray:** this spray is directed under the tongue and can be repeated once after 5 minutes if the symptoms have not resolved.
2. **Anginine tablets:** these are also given under the tongue (the tablet should be spat out when blood pressure settles).
3. **Transiderm-nitro patches:** these patches are applied to skin of either the chest or abdomen and should be removed as soon as the blood pressure settles.

The main side-effect of GTN is a dramatic lowering of the blood pressure which can cause a head ache, flushing and/or fainting.

**Warning:** For this reason GTN must not be used within 12 hours of Sildenafil (Viagra) or Vardenafil (Levitra) or 3 days within use of Tadalafil (Cialis). Combining these drugs causes a serious drop in blood pressure that may lead to the recipient experiencing a heart attack and /or death.

**IF SYMPTOMS PERSIST ARRANGE TO BE TRANSPORTED TO THE NEAREST ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCY UNIT USING AN EMERGENCY AMBULANCE**

#### 5. Remember:

- Attempting to solve the problem has the potential to worsen the situation as it may irritate the system more, at least temporarily, eg. unblocking the catheter or emptying the bowel.

All these things must be done with great care.

***If your blood pressure and symptoms do not settle quickly, CALL AN EMERGENCY AMBULANCE AND SEEK MEDICAL ASSISTANCE***

***YOU MUST KNOW WHAT TO DO BUT OTHER PEOPLE, INCLUDING NON SPECIALIST MEDICAL PERSONNEL, MAY NOT.***



## Further information

- Ambulance: **000**
- Your local doctor