AUTONOMIC DYSREFLEXIA

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Definition

• Abnormal response to a problem somewhere in your body.

• EMERGENCY condition that needs immediate attention.

• Most likely to occur if you have a spinal cord injury (SCI) at or above thoracic level six (T6)
What happens?

• Because of your SCI, your body can’t respond properly to signs that something is wrong.

• Instead, your blood pressure may rise rapidly.

• High blood pressure is a serious medical problem and can cause stroke or death.
Why do YOU need to know?

• Autonomic dysreflexia can be **LIFE-THREATENING** and requires quick and correct **ACTION**.

• Some healthcare professionals aren’t familiar with this condition.

• It is important for **YOU** and the people close to you to learn about it, so that you may be able to educate those that are treating you.
Common WARNING signs

• Major increase in blood pressure

• Pounding headache

• Heavy sweating (especially in your face, neck & shoulders)

• Flushed or reddened skin (especially in the face, neck and shoulders)
Common WARNING signs

- Goose bumps
- Blurry vision/seeing spots
- Stuffy nose
- Anxiety or jitters
- Feeling of tightness in your chest, flutters in your heart, or trouble breathing

Fatigue

Irritability
Take Action!

- **Step 1**: Sit up or raise your head to 90 degrees. Lower your legs (if you are able)
Take Action!

• **Step 2**: Loosen or take off anything tight
  – External catheter tape
  – Abdominal binder
  – Elastic hose or bandages
  – Clothes
  – Shoes or leg braces
  – Leg bag straps
Take Action!

• Step 3
  – Take your blood pressure
    • Every 5 minutes to see if you’re getting better
Take Action!

• Step 4
  – Check your BLADDER!
    • Intermittent catheterization or external catheter
      – Take off external catheter or pads
      – If you (or someone with you) has experience inserting a catheter:
        » Get a catheter.
        » Coat it with lubricant.
        » Insert and empty bladder promptly!
      – STOP trying to cath if:
        » There is NOT someone with experience to do so
        » Catheter won’t slip in easily
        » Your symptoms get worse.
      – CALL 911!
Take Action!

• Step 4 cont’d
  – Check your bladder
    • Indwelling catheter (a Foley or suprapubic)
      – Check tubing for kinks or twists
        » Fix them
      – If tubing is stretched
        » Relax it, then tape it to keep it from pulling.
    – Empty drainage bag
    – If there’s no urine flow, and you have experience irrigating your bladder, GENTLY irrigate with saline solution (no more than 2 tablespoons or 1-2 oz)
    – If there is still no urine flow, insert a catheter if you (or someone with you) has experience in doing so.
    – CALL 911, if for some reason cathing is NOT working or there is no one there able to catheterize your bladder.
EMERGENCY TIP!!!

• If you need to go to the emergency room, ask if you can sit-up. Lying down may make your blood pressure go up!
Take Action!

• Step 5
  – Call your health-care professional
• Even if the warning signs go away:
  – Report symptoms
  – Report what you did to correct the problem
Take Action!

• Step 6
  – If WARNING SIGNS come back again:
    • Repeat the steps again to correct the problem
      – Even if they go away again:
    • Call your health-care professional
    • Go to the EMERGENCY ROOM!
Take Action!

• Step 7
  – At the EMERGENCY ROOM:
    • Tell the staff you think you may be experiencing autonomic dysreflexia and need IMMEDIATE treatment!
    • Ask to have your blood pressure checked
    • Request to keep sitting up as long as your blood pressure is high.
    • Ask the staff to look for possible causes:
      – 1) bladder
      – 2) bowel
      – 3) other causes
Take Action!

• Step 8
  – Keep a record of episodes
    • Date
    • Time
  – Be specific and include:
    • Symptoms
    • Cause
    • How did you correct the problem?
    • Other comments
SUMMARY

• Understand the WARNINGS SIGNS!!!
• Take ACTION!
  – Sit-up
  – Loosen tight clothing, etc.
  – Check blood pressure
  – Check BLADDER
  – Call your health-care professional
  – EMERGENCY ROOM
  – Educate staff
  – Record incident