



## What is spinal cord injury

### Overview

A spinal cord injury – damage to any part of the spinal cord or nerves at the end of the spinal canal (cauda equina) – often causes permanent changes in strength, sensation and other body functions below the site of the injury.

### Symptoms

Your ability to control your limbs after a spinal cord injury depends on two factors:

- where the injury occurred on your spinal cord
- and the severity of injury.

The severity of the injury is often called "the completeness" and is classified as either of the following:

- **Complete.** If all feeling (sensory) and all ability to control movement (motor function) are lost below the spinal cord injury, your injury is called complete.
- **Incomplete.** If you have some motor or sensory function below the affected area, your injury is called incomplete. There are varying degrees of incomplete injury.

### If you suspect that someone has a back or neck injury:

- Don't move the injured person – permanent paralysis and other serious complications can result
- Call your local emergency medical assistance number
- Keep the person still
- Place heavy towels on both sides of the neck or hold the head and neck to prevent them from moving until emergency care arrives
- Provide basic first aid, such as stopping bleeding and making the person comfortable, without moving the head or neck

### Prevention

Following this advice might reduce your risk of a spinal cord injury:

- **Drive safely.** Car crashes are one of the most common causes of spinal cord injuries. Wear a seat belt every time you're in a moving vehicle.
- Make sure that your children wear a **seat belt** or use an age- and weight-**appropriate child safety seat**. To protect them from air bag injuries, children under age 12 should always ride in the back seat.
- Check water depth before diving. Don't dive into a pool unless it's 12 feet (about 3.7 meters) or deeper, don't dive into an aboveground pool and don't dive into water if you don't know how deep it is.



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- **Prevent falls.** Use a step stool with a grab bar to reach high-up objects. Add handrails along stairways. Put nonslip mats on tile floors and in the tub or shower. For young children, use safety gates to block stairs and consider installing window guards.
- **Take precautions when playing sports.** Always wear recommended safety gear. Avoid leading with your head in sports. For example, don't slide headfirst in baseball, and don't tackle using the top of your helmet in football. Use a spotter for new moves in gymnastics.
- **Don't drink and drive.** Don't drive while intoxicated or under the influence of drugs. Don't ride with a driver who's been drinking.