



Aging after spinal cord injury: 40 years

What is the study about?

Individuals with spinal cord injury (SCI) face significant long-term challenges to health, well-being and longevity. Even though SCI may reduce life expectancy, many individuals live decades with SCI. The purpose of this study was to explore the natural course of aging after SCI by identifying changes in participation in community activities, employment, health, and quality of life outcomes among participants who had been in the study for 40 years.

Who participated and how was the study conducted?

The SCI Longitudinal Aging Study initially enrolled 256 participants in 1973, with 49 participants remaining in the study 40 years later. Many of the participants were over 50 years post injury at the time of our study. The average age was 64.9 and the number of years post-injury was 45.9 years. Participants were identified from outpatient records at a Midwestern university hospital and a rehabilitation hospital in Minnesota. Participants completed self-report assessments eight different times over the 40 years.

What did the study find?

We found that these long-term survivors have been resilient to the issues and challenges presented by SCI. There was an increase in the need for non-routine physician visits and hospitalizations, particularly after about 30 years of participation in the study. These dramatic changes indicate that health needs will increase with substantial aging, even among the most resilient participants with the greatest longevity. Although there were declines in satisfaction with some areas of life (sex life, social life and health), other areas remain stable. Individuals continue to adjust well to SCI.

Implications and/or recommendations?

The findings should be used to help people understand the natural course of SCI as people age, and to prepare for possible changes in health, employment and quality of life after SCI. More resources to help individuals to maintain their health and to prepare for changes in function and social support networks that may change as a result of increase in age. Many people who have been relatively healthy over the years may be caught off guard when their health changes. So it is very important to keep a watchful eye for early signs of secondary health conditions, like the development of pressure ulcers, which may lead to other conditions. This may happen much more quickly as people age.

Reference:

Krause, J. S., Newman, J., Clark, J. M. R., & Dunn, M. (2017). The natural course of spinal cord injury: changes over 40 years among those with exceptional survival. *Spinal Cord*, 55(5), 502-508.

This article contains full references to all pertinent information, including details of previous research by other investigators, instruments used, and more detailed findings.

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