



Changes in alcohol use after spinal cord injury

What is the study about?

Alcohol intoxication or heavy alcohol use may lead to spinal cord injury (SCI). Drinking heavily after a SCI may lead to additional health problems, including unintentional injuries from falls or other causes. Our purpose was to identify the portion of people with a history of heavy drinking before SCI onset, to compare these rates to data from the general population, and to identify changes in alcohol use at an average of 17 months post-injury.

Who participated and how was the study conducted?

There was a total of 524 participants who were recruited between 2002 and 2006 from the inpatient census of a large specialty hospital in the Southeastern United States. The SCI peer support coordinator met with all new patients and described the study. Participants completed a questionnaire, which included demographic and alcohol use related questions before the onset of injury and after the rehabilitation hospitalization. The participants averaged 33.5 years of age at the time of this study.

What did the study find?

At SCI onset, the portion of people with SCI who used alcohol, particularly 5 or more drinks upon occasion, was over 3 times higher than the general population (SCI = 44.9%; general population = 13%). Fortunately, the rates of heavy drinking by about 1 ½ years postinjury. However, they still remained slightly elevated compared to the general population. We do not know whether these rates rebounded (people starting drinking again or drinking more heavily).

Implications and/or recommendations?

Because of the high number of people with SCI who are heavy drinkers prior to onset of their injury, it is likely that there will continue to be a lot of people whose drinking puts them at risk for injuries or other health problems after SCI. It is encouraging that the rate overall drops. However, those who continue to drink heavily are likely those for whom drinking may be the biggest problem and the hardest pattern to change. If you have a SCI and drink alcohol, it is important to avoid heavy drinking (4-5 or more drinks in a relatively short time). If you have a SCI, you may benefit from talking with your physician or healthcare provider to get recommendations regarding responsible use of alcohol. Interventions that focus on the responsible use or the cessation of alcohol consumption among persons with SCI, if successful, have promise for reducing secondary complications, particularly additional events that lead to injury. Understanding the changes in pre-and post-injury alcohol consumption patterns is especially important in identifying persons with SCI at risk for alcohol misuse.

Reference:

Davis, J.F. Cao, Y., Krause, J.S. (2017). Changes in alcohol use after the onset of spinal cord injury. *The Journal of Spinal Cord Medicine*, 1-8.