



## Social isolation after spinal cord injury

### What is the study about?

Social isolation has been addressed only to a limited degree among people with spinal cord injury (SCI). The purpose of this study was to help us understand social isolation among people with SCI. This includes both how often people are limited in *making social connections*, as well as how they *feel emotionally about social activities*. The study was conducted with an older group of participants with SCI.

### Who participated and how was the study conducted?

There were 2,208 participants who were recruited from outpatient records of two Midwestern U.S. hospitals and one Southeastern specialty hospital as part of the SCI Longitudinal Aging Study (initiated in 1973). For this stage of the study, there were 768 participants who completed self-report assessments in 2012-2014. The average age was 54.3 years old with an average of 27 years having passed since SCI onset. Study participants completed self-report questionnaires sent by mail. We assessed both social disconnectedness (participation in social activities, social network) and perceived isolation (subjective measure on perceived lack of social support, loneliness).

### What did the study find?

People who felt isolated and alone did indeed have greater social disconnectedness, which means they participated in fewer social activities and had a smaller social network. Several other factors were related to social isolation. Being older and having a more severe SCI related to greater social isolation. However, the longer someone had SCI, the less likely they were to perceive themselves as isolated.

### Implications and/or recommendations?

Social support and being connected socially are very important after SCI. People who have survived a long time with SCI and appear to be more connected socially and to feel less isolated. It is important to continue to build and keep support networks as you age with SCI. Developing peer support networks of older individuals who have been successful in adapting to SCI may help those whose injuries are more recent. Interventions that help people with SCI to increase their social contacts and be more engaged with social activities may be promising in reducing social isolation. The ultimate benefit of preventing social isolation is increased participation, quality-of-life, and longevity.

#### Reference:

Newman, S., Li, C., & Krause, J. S. (2016). Social isolation after spinal cord injury: Indicators from the Longitudinal Aging Study. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 61(4), 408-416.

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

The contents of this research brief were developed under grants from the US Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Community Living, NIDILRR grant numbers 90RT5003, 90DP0098, 90IF0112, and 90IF0015. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and Human Services, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Contributors to this research brief include Susan Newman, Chao Li, James S. Krause, Jameka Rembert, & Melinda Jarnecke.