



An tOspidéal Náisiúnta Athshlánúcháin

A Guide to Healthy Eating Following Spinal Cord Injury



Choose Healthy Eating
Stay Fitter, Healthier, Happier

The NRH Health Hub

Introduction.....	1
Weight Management and Your Health	2
Planning Ahead	5
Drinks.....	7
Snacking	9
The Food Pyramid.....	10
Eating Out.....	17
Making Changes.....	18
Useful Websites.....	20

Introduction

Good health is possible for everyone. After a spinal cord injury (SCI) you can still lead a healthy life. This booklet shows how eating a healthy diet and being a healthy weight can help you to feel good and reduce the likelihood of future health problems.

After SCI people can begin to notice changes in their weight. At first you might experience weight loss, and then as appetite improves, weight gain can occur.

In the longer term, the amount of food (calories) you need to consume after SCI will change.

This is due to a number of reasons:

- Changes to the muscles in your body
- Changes to the number of calories you need for activity
- Changes to the level of activity and type of exercise you do

These factors all change the amount of food you need to stay at a healthy weight.

Weight Management and Your Health

When you gain too much weight it can cause health problems. For example:

- ✔ Being overweight can put more strain on the muscles in your arms when you are pushing your wheelchair or when transferring in and out of the wheelchair. This can lead to problems in the future.
- ✔ If you gain a lot of weight, this can impact on the equipment you use and space you need; for example, you may need a wider wheelchair or more people to help with your care.
- ✔ Being overweight can affect your transfers (getting in and out of your wheelchair). This can put your skin at risk of developing a pressure ulcer.
- ✔ Being overweight can increase your risk of developing conditions like heart disease and diabetes.



Keeping track of your weight

Knowing that weight gain has associated health risks is a good reason to put a plan in place to prevent future health problems. Therefore, it is important to:

✔ Check your weight often

Ask a member of staff to check your weight on the hoist scales (located in ward areas), or on the wheelchair scales which is located in the Urology Department.

You can also check your own weight on the scales located in the Health Hub area in the Sports Therapy Department.



✔ **Be aware of the foods that you eat and how this can affect your weight**

To lose weight you must:

Eat less calories... (from food and drinks, you eat) **...than you use** (by being physically active).

✔ **Be physically active**

Information is available from your treating team on how to be active in ways that are suitable for you. Information is also available at the Health Hub in the Sports Therapy Department

How do I know if I need to lose weight?

Body Mass Index (BMI) is a measure of your weight for your height. Your BMI is a guide to tell you if you are a healthy weight for your height.

In general, the higher your BMI, the more likely you are to have health problems such as heart disease and diabetes.

In the longer term, a healthy BMI for people with spinal cord injury is lower than the BMI range for people who do not have spinal cord injury. This is a BMI of 22kg/m²

Ask your health professional (doctor, nurse, GP) to calculate your BMI. They can tell you if you have a healthy BMI or need to lose weight.

There is also an online calculator which you can access on the following websites:

<https://www.indi.ie/bmi-test.html>

www.weigh2live safefood.eu/planandtrack/tools/bmi.asp

If I need to lose weight, how much should I lose?

If you have gained a lot of weight or were overweight before your injury, losing 5-10% of your body weight can have a very good effect on your health for the future.

Weight loss can be slow!...

The quickest way to lose weight isn't always the best way

- ✔ Following fad or quick weight loss diets won't help you make the lasting changes you need to be healthy.
- ✔ Losing weight can be slow. A rate of 0.5-1kg (1-2 lbs) weight loss each week, is a hard but achievable goal to set.
- ✔ Exercise can help. It has many benefits for your health. Weight loss can be one of those benefits; it is always important to eat a healthy diet.

Sleep and Your Weight

To reach and maintain a healthy weight, it can be just as important for you to get enough sleep at night as it is to eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly.

You are more likely when you're tired to look for food and drinks that are high in fat and sugar. Staying up late can make you more inclined to eat snacks.

Here are some tips to help improve sleep:

Tips to Try:	Things to Avoid:
Set a daily routine for going to bed and getting up at the same time each day.	Avoid taking naps during the day – rest in bed if necessary.
Go outdoors whenever possible. Taking in fresh air and daylight can help your body relax into a rhythm of sleeping and waking, and when this is a regular activity, it can help to regulate your sleep cycle.	Don't drink coffee, tea, cocoa or caffeinated soft drinks for at least five hours before bedtime - they interfere with getting to sleep and staying asleep.
Try to relax for about an hour before bedtime – try quiet activities such as reading or listening to relaxing music.	Eating a heavy meal or exercising too close to bedtime will interfere with getting to sleep.
Writing down your thoughts can also be a relaxing activity.	Smoking and alcohol taken close to bedtime can cause disrupted sleep.

Planning Ahead

Taking time to plan ahead can make it easier to reach your aims or goals, whatever they may be.

When making lifestyle changes, the more organised you are, the easier it is to be successful.

Planning while in hospital

There are a number of things that you can do to help manage your weight while you are staying at the NRH.

- ✔ Low-fat meal options are available each day in the patients' canteen. The menu options are displayed at the entrance to the canteen. If you have your meal on the ward, ask a member of staff what the low-fat option is for that day.
- ✔ Avoid fizzy drinks that are high in sugar such as cola, orange or lemon and lime drinks. Try the sugar-free options, low-calorie squash or water instead.
- ✔ Use sweetener instead of sugar in tea or coffee.
- ✔ Suggest to family and friends not to bring you food or drinks that are high in fat and sugar when visiting you in the hospital.
- ✔ If you are hungry between meals, ask for fruit which is available on the ward.

Planning when at home

When you go home you will have many things to think about to make sure you have a healthy diet.

Changing your eating habits can be difficult. The more organised you are, the easier it will be to succeed. Otherwise, it can be easy to slip back into old habits – mainly because it requires less effort.

When you have healthy meals and snacks planned and prepared in advance, you are more likely to choose these instead of less healthy options.

Putting plans into practice

Making sure you keep to a healthy diet will take some thought. Planning ahead for each day will help you to save time. Some points to consider as part of your planning might include:

- ✔ What are you going to cook?
- ✔ Who will prepare and cook your meals?
- ✔ What ingredients do you need for these meals? A shopping list will help.
- ✔ Online shopping can be a great way to make sure you always have access to healthy options.

Tips for Planning your Meals

Ask your occupational therapist about modified cutlery or home modifications to make cooking easier for you. Tell the person who will be preparing your meals about your healthy eating plan and discuss your ideas together.








- ✔ Start with something simple until you get more confident. Try an omelette with a fresh green salad or a stir-fry.
- ✔ Ask someone to prepare fruit in advance for each day, for example, a fruit salad or chopped fruit. This will make a healthy snack during the day and can be stored in an airtight container until you are ready to eat it.
- ✔ Use pre-cut vegetables or frozen vegetables if you find vegetable preparation difficult or tiring.
- ✔ Build your meals around the Food Pyramid.
- ✔ Cook in batches so that you always have a healthy option in the freezer.

If you are buying ready meals, look for the 'healthy living' or 'low fat' range. Take a look at the calorie content of the meal.



Drinks

Sugary drinks are high in calories which can result in weight gain. These include fizzy drinks, sports drinks, squashes, cordials and juice drinks.

Fizzy Drinks		
Drink Description	Grams of sugar per 200ml serving	Equivalent cubes of sugar
Club Orange	26g	5 
Fanta Orange	24.8g	5 
7UP	22.4g	4 
Coca Cola	21.2g	4 
Pepsi	21.2g	4 
Lucozade	17.4g	4 
Sprite	13.2g	3 

Information courtesy of safefood.eu

Think before you drink

It is important to make sure you drink enough fluid. Keeping well hydrated helps keep the skin healthy and supple; this can reduce the likelihood of developing a pressure ulcer.

Fluid is also important in bowel management as it can prevent constipation.

The amount of fluid you need to drink will vary for each individual. Ask your nurse how much you need to drink.

Drink water or sugar free flavoured water as an alternative to sugary drinks. Drinking enough can also help to reduce appetite.



About Alcohol

Check with your doctor if it's safe for you to drink alcohol

Alcoholic drinks are very high in calories. Lower calorie options are available when you are out for a drink or a meal, for example:

- ✔ Choose **light** beer or cider
- ✔ When drinking beer, choose bottles instead of pints to drink less
- ✔ When drinking spirits, use diet mixers
- ✔ Use diet lemonade for spritzers or shandy
- ✔ Have a diet drink or water between each alcoholic drink.

Drink	Calories	Food Equivalent
Pint of beer, ale or stout	210 cals	1 packet of crisps
Quarter bottle of wine	138 cals	½ bar of chocolate
Pub measure of spirit	230 cals	1 custard cream biscuit
Pint of cider	190 cals	1 slice of fruit cake
Bottle of alcopop (275ml)	21.2g	1 ring doughnut

Information courtesy of askaboutalcohol.ie

Snacking

Snacking can cause weight gain - think about how often you snack, and why:

- Are you snacking because of hunger? Or is it boredom?
- Are you eating healthy foods or treat foods as snacks?
- Have you tried eating smaller snacks?
- If you find you are snacking because your mood is low, you can find useful information about this on www.yourmentalhealth.ie
The table below has some snack suggestions:

Choose these more often	Choose these less often
1 portion of fruit	1 funsize or treat size bar
1 low fat yoghurt	Packet of low fat or light crisps
2 crackers, oatcakes or rice cakes with a low fat cheese triangle	3 squares of chocolate
1 handful of nuts and seeds	1 ice cream scoop or one ice-pop
1 small glass of smoothie	6 jelly sweets
4 breadsticks	2 chocolate sweets
Carrot sticks and 1 dessertspoon of hummus	4 marshmallows
1 small bag of popcorn	1 low calorie instant drinking chocolate
Portion of homemade vegetable soup	
1 small skinny latte or cappuccino	

Information courtesy of 'Guide to Managing your Weight'

The Food Pyramid

Eating a variety of foods is important for good health. The food pyramid shows each of the food groups that we need in our diet. The portion size of these foods matter – more information on portion sizes is detailed later in this booklet.

If you have swallowing problems, some of these foods may not be suitable for you. Ask your speech and language therapist for more information.

Limit the foods on the top shelf of the food pyramid to a maximum of once or twice a week. The Food Pyramid has been developed by the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive. Further information is available on their website: www.healthpromotion.ie



The Food Pyramid

For adults, teenagers and children aged five and over

Foods and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt

Not needed for good health.



NOT every day



Maximum once or twice a week

Fats, spreads and oils



In very small amounts

Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts



2 Servings a day

Milk, yogurt and cheese



3 Servings a day
5 for children age 9-12 and teenagers age 13-18

Wholemeal cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice



3-5* Servings a day
Up to 7* for teenage men age 19-30

Vegetables, salad and fruit



5-7 Servings a day

*Daily Servings Guide – wholemeal cereals and breads, potatoes, pasta and rice

Active (5-12)	Teenager (13-18)	Adult (19-50)	Teenager (13-18)	Adult (51+)
3-4	4	4-5	3	3-4
3-5	5-7	5-7	4-5	4-6
			Inactive	Adult (51+)
			3	3
			4-5	4

There is no guideline for inactive children as it is essential that all children are active.

Source: Department of Health, December 2016.



Drink at least 8 cups of fluid a day – water is best

The NRH Health Hub

Fruit and Vegetables

Try to eat as many different types of fruit and vegetables as possible - they are filling and make a good snack if you are hungry between meals. Most people in Ireland are not eating enough fruit and vegetables.

Fruit and vegetables contain fibre. Dietary fibre is important for a regular bowel motion. Fibre makes your bowel motion softer and easier to pass. Changes to your fibre intake can affect your bowel programme. Increase the amount of fruit and vegetables in your diet little by little each day to see what the right balance is for you.

Fruit juice is high in natural sugar. Avoid drinking more than half a glass of fruit juice each day. Cranberry juice for example, can be high in sugar, and it is unlikely to reduce the likelihood of developing a urinary tract infection.



Bread, Cereals and Potatoes

The number of servings you need to eat from this group will depend on how active you are. This may have changed since before your injury.

Wholemeal and wholegrain breads and cereals also contain fibre. Fibre is important for regular bowel habits. Fibre can also help to make you feel fuller for longer. This can be helpful if you are trying to lose weight.



Milk and Dairy Foods

These foods provide calcium which is important for strong bones and helps prevent osteoporosis (thinning of the bones). Having a spinal cord injury can mean you are more at risk of having osteoporosis. One of the ways you can prevent further bone loss is to make sure you have enough calcium and vitamin D in your diet. There is more information on Vitamin D on page 14.

Choose low fat milk and dairy foods when possible. Low fat dairy foods contain the same amount of calcium and protein but less fat and calories than full fat dairy foods.



Meat, Fish and Alternatives

Try to have two of these foods each day, one at each meal. Eat fish twice a week, once should be an oily fish (such as salmon, herring or mackerel). Oily fish have omega 3 fats which are good for heart health. Avoid meats which are high in fat such as sausages or burgers.

Oils and Fats

Fats, spreads and oils provide essential fats but be careful about how much you use as they are high in calories. When you are using a spread or oil choose olive, rapeseed or sunflower oil. Use as little as you can.



Foods Containing Fat or Sugar

Eat as few of these foods as you can as they are high in calories. We do not need sugar for energy and eating too much sugar can lead to weight gain and tooth decay.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps your body absorb calcium for strong bones. Vitamin D forms under your skin when you are outside in daylight. If you spend a lot of time indoors or have been in hospital for a number of months, you may not be getting enough Vitamin D.

Foods which are good sources of Vitamin D are:

- Oily fish such as salmon, sardines or trout
- Eggs, meat and milk contain small amounts of vitamin D
- Some breakfast cereals or milk can have added vitamin D



Using the Food Pyramid: Portion Sizes

It is easy to overestimate the amount of food you need at meals. Below is a guide to portion sizes to help you have the right amount.

Protein

MEAT/FISH

1 portion = your palm size



PEAS, BEANS & LENTILS

1 portion = 3/4 to 1 cup (cooked) or 6 dessertspoons



EGGS

1 portion = 2 eggs



Fats

OIL/BUTTER

1 portion = 1 level teaspoon



Carbohydrates

RICE/PASTA

1 portion = 1 disposable cup of cooked pasta/rice



PORRIDGE

1 portion = 1/3 of a cup of uncooked oats



Images courtesy of safefood.eu

CEREAL FLAKES

1 portion = 1 + 1/2 cups cereal



BREAD

1 portion =
2 slices of regular bread



POTATO

1 portion =
2 small or one medium



Dairy

CHEESE

1 portion = 1 matchbox sized piece



YOGHURT

1 portion = 1 small pot



MILK

1 portion = a 200ml glass



Images courtesy of safefood.eu

Eating Out

If you are planning on eating out or ordering in, remember that portion sizes are often larger than what we would normally eat at home.

Have a small healthy snack a couple of hours before going out or ordering in; if you are feeling too hungry, you're more likely to order more than you need. Here are some tips for healthier options:

- ✔ Thin based pizza with vegetable toppings and ham, chicken or tuna can be a good choice. Avoid meats like salami or pepperoni which are high in fat.
- ✔ Choose salad, baked or boiled potatoes instead of chips; order vegetables without butter.
- ✔ Avoid filling up on breads or crackers that come with the meal.
- ✔ Choose grilled fish, chicken or vegetables rather than high-fat meat dishes. Ask for sauces to be served on the side.
- ✔ Choose tomato based sauces rather than creamy or cheese sauces, or pesto.
- ✔ Choose baked or boiled potatoes instead of chips, and boiled rice instead of fried.
- ✔ Stop eating when you are beginning to feel full.
- ✔ Choose fruit based desserts when possible.



Making Changes

When you are making changes to the foods you eat, start with changes that will be easy to keep to. Here are some useful tips:

Keeping Track

- ✔ Use a notebook or a computer, smartphone or tablet computer to keep track of the food you eat and the exercise you do. This will show up habits or activities you may want to change.
- ✔ Weigh yourself regularly and take a note of your weight. If you can't check your weight at home, talk to your public health nurse or GP. Ask if they can suggest where you can check your weight.
- ✔ Try using the Weight Record Chart available at the NRH Health Hub to track your weight.

Time	Food & Drink	Activity	Comments & thoughts
8am	1 funsize or treat size bar		
11am	Packet of low fat or light crisps		Didn't have fruit, ended up having biscuits instead. Need to buy some fruit to stay on track
1pm	Wholegrain wrap with chicken, lettuce, tomato and low-fat mayo	Pushed around the park 3 times	Met Pat in the park. Did three laps. Didn't want to go but felt good afterwards.

Setting Goals

- ✔ Set yourself goals and targets that you will be able to meet. For example, have a piece of fruit instead of a biscuit between meals. You can then build on this success.
- ✔ Plan your meals and exercise.

Staying Motivated

- ✓ Become aware of triggers to eat apart from hunger, such as boredom or comfort eating, and plan around them.
- ✓ Eat regularly and don't skip meals.
- ✓ Have a piece of fruit with you to snack on instead of snacks that are high in fat or sugar, or distract yourself with another task.
- ✓ Online grocery shopping with delivery will allow you to have fresh food and more time to prepare.

Advice and Support is Available

You may find that eating healthily is harder after your injury, but with some careful planning it is very achievable. Remember, everyone can have an off day; and if that happens, don't let it throw you off course; continue on with your plan to stay fit and healthy.

Eating a healthy diet is about getting the right amounts of different foods that your body needs to stay healthy and protect you against future health problems. The Food Pyramid will guide you get the right balance of foods.

If you have gained a lot of weight or were overweight before your injury, losing 10% of your body weight can have a very good effect on your health for the future.

Ask your nurse or doctor to work out your BMI. They can tell you if you have a healthy BMI or need to lose weight. If you want to talk about how to manage your weight, ask your doctor or nurse to refer you to the dietitian.

If you have swallowing problems, some foods may not be suitable for you. Ask your speech and language therapist for more information.

Be physically active. Information is available from your treating team on how to be active in ways that are suitable for you.



Useful Websites

Finding reliable nutrition information can be difficult. The websites listed below provide reliable information on nutrition and health:

INDI - Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute

This website has lots of information on how diet affects our health.

<https://www.indi.ie/healthy-eating-healthy-weight-and-dieting.html>

Weigh 2 Live

Weigh2live.eu has plenty of tips and advice on how to achieve your healthy weight and how to set your own goals; free for adults.

<http://www.safefood.eu/Healthy-Eating/Weight-Loss/Weigh2Live-Together-10-week-weight-loss-programm.aspx>

NHS

The National Health Service (NHS) in the UK has a health website which has information on a free 12-week diet and exercise plan. It is not designed specifically for people with SCI but has good advice.

<http://www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/weight-loss-guide/Pages/weight-loss-guide.aspx>

Healthy Eating

The Healthy Ireland website has information on the new Food Pyramid to help you make choices around foods you need to have a healthy diet.

<http://www.healthyireland.ie/health-initiatives/heg/>

Food Labelling

It is important to understanding the label on packaged foods. This will help you decide which the healthier options are when you are shopping. For more information see the link below.

<http://www.safefood.eu/Publications/Consumer-information/How-they-measure-up-A-simple-guide-to-food-labell.aspx>

Drink Aware

This website has a range of online tools and resources to help you to understand how alcohol can affect your health and wellbeing.

<http://www.drinkaware.ie/>

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