



# Methodist Rehabilitation Center

SCI Education : eTHANKS Modules

## Module 7 Emergency Situations

### Unit 1 Autonomic Dysreflexia

#### Key Point

Autonomic dysreflexia is a state of over-activity of the Autonomic Nervous System that causes an abrupt onset of excessively high blood pressure. This condition is unique to SCI patients.

Out of all of the emergencies that may occur in everyday life, Autonomic Dysreflexia is most **unique** and most **emergent** to those who have spinal cord injuries. Autonomic dysreflexia means an over-activity of the Autonomic Nervous System causing an abrupt onset of excessively high blood pressure. It may appear in the patient three months up to several years after the injury has occurred.

**Causes:** The following can cause autonomic dysreflexia...

- Bladder Distension
- Fecal Impaction
- Acute Abdomen
- Sexual Intercourse
- Deep Vein Thrombosis
- Pulmonary Emboli
- Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy
- Heterotrophic Bone Formation
- Invasive Procedures
- Pain
- Pressure Sores
- Medications
- Labor and Delivery
- Functional Electrical Stimulation
- Fractures, Dislocations, and other Trauma

## **Key Point**

**Critical symptoms of autonomic dysreflexia include...**

- 1. Heavy sweating**
- 2. A major increase in blood pressure**
- 3. Blurry vision**

## **Symptoms of Autonomic Dysreflexia:**

**There are numerous symptoms of autonomic dysreflexia. If you have any or all of these symptoms, or feel any coming about, let your caregiver know as soon as possible.**

- Heavy sweating
- Goose bumps
- Flushed or reddened skin
- A stuffy nose
- Anxiety or jitters
- Blurry vision or seeing spots
- Trouble breathing or tightness in your chest
- A major increase (20-40 mm Hg) in systolic blood pressure
- Slow heart rate

**If any or all of these symptoms occur, make sure that you take action right away!**

## **Key Point**

### **Important responses to symptoms...**

- 1. Sit up or at least raise the head 90 degrees**
- 2. Remove tight, restrictive clothing**
- 3. Take blood pressure and pulse every five minutes**

## **Treatment Measures for Autonomic Dysreflexia**

**The Paralyzed Veterans of America illustrates the following list of things that you can do to help yourself:**

- Sit up or raise your head to 90 degrees. This will help your blood pressure to go back to normal. Stay in an upright position until your blood pressure goes back to normal.
- If you have any tight clothing or objects on your body, remove them! Tight clothing can constrict the blood vessels and raise your blood pressure.
- Remember to take your blood pressure and your pulse every 5 minutes. Do this until your blood pressure is sustained at a normal pressure and your pulse is sustained as well.
- See if there is any drainage from your bladder. Allow your bladder to drain if possible.
- If your bowel is full, an anesthetic jelly must be applied before checking or trying to empty the bowel.
- Always remember to call your health-care professional!!! It does not matter if the symptoms or warning signs go away, your health-care professional must be aware of your condition.

**If the symptoms or warning signs listed above happen to return, repeat the steps and go to the emergency room! Tell an ER staff that you have autonomic dysreflexia.**

**Tips taken from the Paralyzed Veterans of America website. [www.pva.org](http://www.pva.org)**

**End of Emergencies Module, Unit 1: Autonomic Dysreflexia**