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# Issues specific to women with SCI

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## Chapter 65

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## ISCoS Textbook on **COMPREHENSIVE MANAGEMENT OF SPINAL CORD INJURIES**

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# Outline

- Introduction
- Epidemiology
- Gender differences
- Health issues
- Psychosocial issues
- Conclusion
- Recommendations



- Women form a **minority** group in SCI
  - Less data, less literature
- Women with SCI have **specific needs**
- Women with SCI have **specific barriers**
  - Economical
  - Physical
  - Psychological
  - Social





# Epidemiology

- Incidence and prevalence of SCI is much lower in women (M/F 3-4/1), especially in traumatic SCI and in low income countries (up to 13,5/1)
- This trend is changing
- The relative proportion of women is growing

# Gender differences

- Recovery & outcome
  - Some studies have shown **greater neurological improvement** in women
    - Neuroprotective role of oestrogen in CNS?
    - Less and lower impact trauma?
  - **Men tend to perform functionally better** than women





# Gender differences

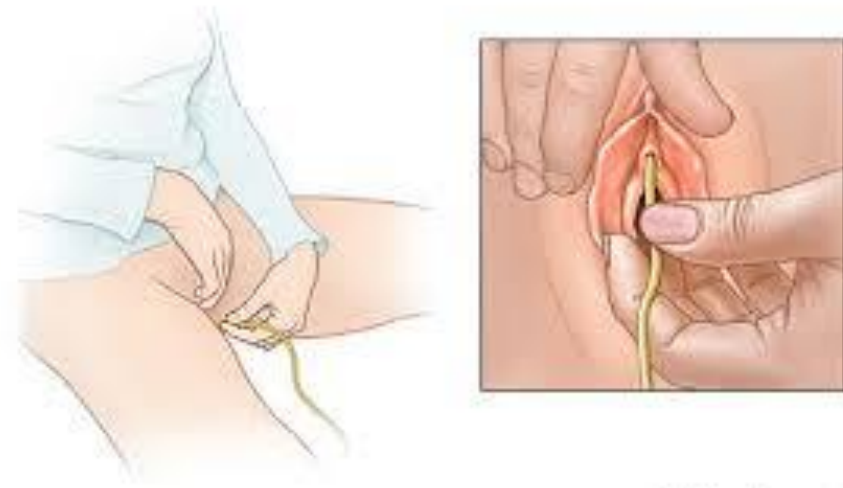
- Biomechanical issues

- Due to anthropometric characteristics women are predisposed to **injury at the shoulders**
- Different transfer techniques, oestrogen,...
- Women report more often **pain at the upper limbs**
- Women show more radiological **degenerative changes at the upper limbs**

**Prevention of overuse** of the upper limbs is crucial in women with SCI by means of **education, training** and more adapted **wheelchair design**

# Health issues

- Bladder care
  - Clean intermittent catheterisation (CIC) practically may be more challenging in women a continent urinary diversion may be a good alternative
  - Incontinence has a greater social impact in women.



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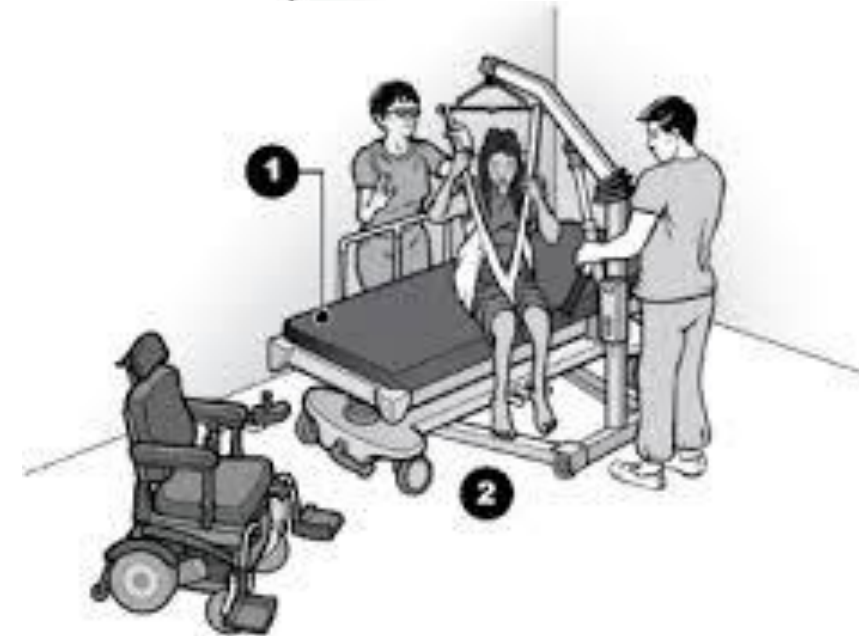
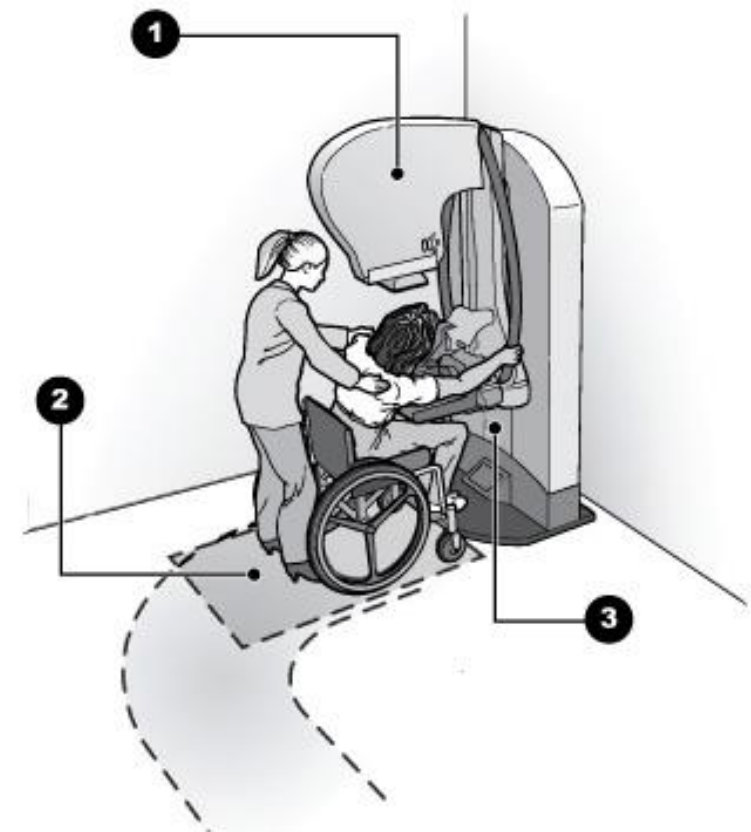


# Health issues

- Complications & ageing
  - More **musculoskeletal pain**
  - More **fatigue**
  - **Ageing** process is experienced more quickly and '**accelerated**' by women with SCI
  - Men more often change **equipment**
  - Men have less **transportation** problems

# Health issues

- Barriers to health care & screenings access for women with SCI
  - Environmental
  - Informational
  - Attitudinal
  - Financial



- Sexual education and counselling
  - Women with SCI report a **higher** degree of sexual **satisfaction** but receive **less counselling**: specific education to rehab teams
  - Need for **peers** and **support groups**



# Physical activity & fitness, sports

- Women are more **prone to overload** than men, musculoskeletal and cardiovascular
- Women **participate less** in physical and **sports** activities than men but perform **more household** activities
- IPC: women in sport committee
  - WoMentering programme





# Physical activity & fitness, sports

- Men have a higher peak aerobic power output, mean power, peak oxygen uptake, mean velocity and muscle strength
- Women have a higher velocity fatigue index
- Women have a lower lean body mass
- **Rehabilitation** in women is **more demanding and takes longer**

# Psychosocial issues

- Mental health
- Quality of Life
- Body perception, self-image and sexual identity
- Vulnerability
- Return to work / domestic work
- Motherhood
- Participation in community life



# Mental health

- Women report more perceived **stress**, social **isolation**, lower mobility & employment and lower social support
- Women are **less assisted in care by their spouse** than men



# Quality of Life



- Women experience **disadvantages** in economics, social participation and physical and psychological health, all contributing factors for **QoL**
- **Social support is more important** for life satisfaction in women than in men



# Body perception, self-image and sexual identity

- The physical and perceived **changed body** of women with SCI creates a loss of **(sexual) identity** and **self-esteem**
- **Privacy** must be respected at the hospital, rehabilitation centre and at home



# Vulnerability

- Different types of **abuse** are described by women living with SCI
  - psychological, physical, sexual, financial, as well as abuse while controlling the care and environment
- Rehabilitation teams have an important task in decreasing the **sense of vulnerability**
- Aspects of **privacy and minority !**



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## Article 6 - Women with disabilities

1. States Parties recognize that women and girls with disabilities are subject to multiple discrimination, and in this regard shall take measures to ensure the full and equal enjoyment by them of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.
2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure the full development, advancement and empowerment of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of the human rights and fundamental freedoms set out in the present Convention.

# Return to work / domestic work

- Women with disabilities experience **unequal chances in employment**
- Men work twice as many hours
- Men twice as likely to have a job



- Mothers with a spinal cord injury do not experience any difference in family relationships
- Being a parent increases quality of life in women with SCI

[www.sciparenting.com](http://www.sciparenting.com)



- Women with SCI experience more **barriers to participation** than men
  - More single
  - Less transportation
  - Less offer of activities
  - Feeling uncomfortable with new body
  - ....



# Conclusion

- Women with SCI **experience their disability differently** than men do
- **Literature** on women with SCI is still **scarce or inconclusive**
- Little is known about the life of women with SCI in **low- and middle-income countries**



# Recommendations

- Take into account morphological, physiological, psychological and social **specificities of women in SCI research**
- Encourage **education and empowerment** of women with SCI
- Organise training of **peer counsellors** and improve **social support**



# Recommendations

- Improve **knowledge and skills** of healthcare professionals
- Improve **awareness** of the rehabilitation community
- Improve **accessibility** to specific care and community facilities for women

# Recommendations

- Offer **leisure and sports activities** focused on needs and preferences expressed by women with SCI
- Address **attitudinal barriers** towards women with SCI through awareness activities, education, financial incentives and policies
- **Disseminate** the WRD/ CRPD / IPSCI

# Thank you, merci !

