Autonomic Dysreflexia (AD) is a medical emergency specific to individuals with Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) at the neurological level of T6 or above. It is usually caused when a painful irritation occurs below the level of your spinal cord injury. It can present with a variety of signs/symptoms which can vary from mild to severe discomfort. As a SCI individual you need to have a good understanding of AD and be familiar with signs and symptoms and immediate management of this potentially life threatening condition. It must be addressed immediately because if it is untreated it may progress to cause a seizure, stroke or death. (Ahrens Prestice 1998).

**CAUSES**

- Bladder: Distension (due to catheter blockage or kinking), Urinary tract infection, Bladder stones
- Bowel: Constipation, Haemorrhoids, Fissure, Having bowel care performed
- Skin: Pressure Ulcer, Tight Clothing, Ingrown toenail, Blister/burn
- Others: Scrotal compression, Sexual stimulation, Labour childbirth, Menstruation and any condition that would usually cause abdominal pain

**HOW DO I GET AUTONOMIC DYSREFLEXIA?**

1. Irritation below the level of SCI such as a full bladder sends signals up the spine
2. Constriction of blood vessel
3. Signal to brain
4. Causings high blood pressure at or above thoracic level T6
5. Slow pulse and dilatation of blood vessels above the injury level as an attempt to compensate for the rise in blood pressure causing symptoms
6. Attempted compensation message cannot pass through the spinal cord and blood pressure continues to rise

**SIGN & SYMPTOMS**

- BP 20-30mmHg above normal
- Sweating
- Pounding headache
- Flushed
- Tight chest & stuffy nose
- Blurred vision

**Emergency Treatment for Autonomic Dysreflexia**

- Signs / Symptoms of Autonomic Dysreflexia
  - Call for assistance
  - Sit upright and lower legs
  - Loosen any tight clothing / legs straps
  - Monitor BP until symptoms have resolved
- Common causes to exclude / treat first are:
  1. Bladder Distension
  2. Constipation
- If symptoms persist and cause is unknown:
  - Take prescribed medication
  - Nifedipine 10mg capsule “bite and swallow” method
- If BP not settling and cause not identified:
  - Contact your GP or Accident / Emergency Department

**CONCLUSION**

It is essential for you, family members or carers to recognise and understand the potential causes, prevention and treatment of AD. If an episode of AD is identified quickly, and treated immediately the symptoms may then subside, thus removing the likelihood of complications.