

(20-minute read, about 1,625 words)

## **The Spinal Foundation I COVID-19 & Spinal Cord Injury I Guidance**

### **Key Messages:**

- 1) Breathlessness is Medical Emergency. Go to hospital immediately.
- 2) Social Distancing (Staying at Home & Physical Distancing of two metres or about six feet with outsiders) is the only protection against Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19).
- 3) Best-in-class rehabilitation experts advising The Spinal Foundation on COVID-19 have recommended that persons with spinal cord injury must stay at home till September 30, 2020. In villages, where there are no COVID-19 cases for the preceding 28 days, persons with spinal cord injury - paraplegics with injury level of T6 and lower - could step out cautiously with mask, face shield and most importantly, maintaining a Physical Distance of two metres (about six feet or the length of a bicycle) when meeting or talking with outsiders at home or outdoors.
- 4) Quadriplegics are at the highest risk, irrespective of age as respiratory and cardiovascular functions are affected at the time of injury, and COVID-19 also attacks the respiratory system.
- 5) If the person with spinal cord injury or any other person at home develops fever, the person with spinal cord injury must SELF-ISOLATE for at least 14 days.

### **Detailed Note**

Persons with Spinal Cord Injury will be at higher risk to contract Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) due to compromised quality of health and immunity stemming from multiple disabilities imposed by the spinal cord injury.

At present, there is no cure for COVID-19 in the world just as there is no cure for spinal cord injury.

**The MOST EFFECTIVE WAY to Stay Safe is PREVENTION by SOCIAL DISTANCING.**



A) Must DO (Level 1) - Carefully Observe Social Distancing by

- 1) Staying at Home.
- 2) Maintaining Physical Distancing of two metres (about six feet) from any person when outside the home or with any outsider inside the home.

### Stay At Home Recommendation

**Best-in-class rehabilitation experts advising The Spinal Foundation on COVID-19 have recommended that persons with spinal cord injury must stay at home till September 30, 2020.** The reasoning is the higher risks with COVID-19 and the fact that the numbers infected with the virus in India continue to rise. A review of this guidance will be made towards mid-September 2020, and an updated guidance issued.

In villages, where there are no COVID-19 cases for the preceding 28 days, persons with spinal cord injury - paraplegics with injury level of T6 and lower - could step out cautiously with mask, face shield and most importantly, maintaining a Physical Distance of two metres (about six feet or the length of a bicycle) when meeting or talking with persons outdoors.

B) Must DO (Level 2) - If you do not do Social Distancing, nothing protects you from the possibility of contracting COVID-19. If you do Social Distancing, you can enhance your safety by following the additional four best-practices every day:

- 1) Do a hand wash with Soap and Water for 20 seconds each time and at least eight times a day. This helps to remove the virus load and other germs. Please always remember to wash your hands with Soap and Water every time before and after eating (even if it is with a spoon) and before brushing your teeth, shaving and washing your face, as these are actions that 100% involve touching your mouth and may be even the nose.
- 2) Do not touch your face with your palms and/or fingers. This helps prevent the virus from entering your body through the nose, mouth and/or eyes.
- 3) Cough or sneeze into the creek of your elbow. This prevents the virus from getting into your palms and contains its spread.
- 4) Have a healthy breakfast within two hours of waking up (preferably before 9:00 AM so that a disciplined routine is in place). This helps to strengthen your macrophage cells that help fight infections after weakening during sleeping hours.

If you wear a mask, it is partial protection for others only. Wear a mask if you need to go out to public places for common good. At home, if the person with spinal cord injury, caregiver or any member at home tests positive for COVID-19, every person must wear a mask, as a layer of protection.



A person with spinal cord injury is safe only if every family member at home, including the paid caregiver, if any, follows these best practices and stays safe.

### **THE MOST VULNERABLE GROUPS**

The following categories of persons with spinal cord injury carry significantly higher levels of vulnerability to COVID-19:

#### **Maximum Risk**

- A) Tetraplegics (Quadriplegics) - persons with spinal cord injury at the cervical level - are an extreme high-risk group, as their respiratory and cardiovascular functions are affected partly and permanently from the date of the spinal cord injury.
- B) High-level paraplegics with injury levels T1, T2, T3, T4 and T5 are also vulnerable as their lung capacities and cardiovascular system are partly impacted from the time of the injury.
- C) **If, in addition to a Spinal Cord Injury, you have any one or more of the following conditions (comorbidities), you have a higher risk level:**
  - 1) Diabetes mellitus
  - 2) Hypertension
  - 3) Heart ailments
  - 4) Chronic kidney disease
  - 5) Age above 50 years
  - 6) Grade 3 or Grade 4 bedsores
  - 7) Obesity
  - 8) No regular exercises
  - 9) Recent episode of Autonomic Dysreflexia or poikilothermia
  - 10) Recovering or recovered recently from recent surgery / health condition

#### **Reason for COVID-19 RISK for Persons with Spinal Cord Injury**

- 1) Compromised respiratory system, overall health and immunity due to living with multiple disabilities day in, day out for a lifetime means the body's ability to fight COVID-19 is affected and weaker as compared to an able-bodied person without any health impairment.
- 2) A COVID-19 infection can lead to greater damage for persons with spinal cord injury, and at a faster pace as compared to an able-bodied person who has no other health issues.



- 3) A person with spinal cord injury is likely to have a faster clinical progression after the onset of COVID-19 infection as compared to an able-bodied person without any health impairment.
- 4) There is a risk that COVID-19 infection may leave a person with spinal cord injury with additional health complications that may take time to resolve. COVID-19-specific consequences that are observed world-wide among able-bodied persons - kidney failures, blood clots in the brain and elsewhere in the cardiovascular system, inflammatory disorders, overactive immune system and lung-related issues that stay with you even after you become COVID-19 negative; these can significantly complicate life for persons with spinal cord injury. Spinal cord injury related issues such as bedsores, incorrect bladder and bowel management, mishandled episodes of autonomic dysreflexia and the lack of necessary support systems for persons injured at the cervical level are possible in the event of hospitalization for COVID-19 due to lack of awareness and can prolong recovery times to life as it used to be for the person before the infection and impact lifestyle. This risk is highest for quadriplegics and persons with spinal cord injury with diabetes mellitus, hypertension, heart ailments, chronic kidney or other diseases, and those aged above 50 years.
- 5) A COVID-19 infection may leave a person with spinal cord injury with reduced levels of independence or enhanced level of dependency for those who need support in certain functions of day-to-day life.
- 6) If you are required to be hospitalized, barring a couple of hospitals across India, you cannot be sure if the hospital and its staff will know how to handle a person with spinal cord injury. The pressures on the hospital staff due to COVID-19 may also mean a person with spinal cord injury may not get the extent of care required.

### **What If You Develop Symptoms of COVID-19**

Symptoms of COVID-19: Fever, dry cough, breathing difficulty, tiredness, running nose, loss of smell, loss of taste and sore throat are the more common symptoms.

- 1) If you have fever and cough, assume you have COVID-19 and self-isolate in a separate space in your home. Starting early and immediately could help manage at home itself. Please take only paracetamol tablets every four hours to manage the fever. Please remember that treatment in the early stages is paracetamol anywhere in the world. Other treatments are not proven. The use of any other medication must be decided only by medical practitioners during hospitalization.
- 2) If you develop breathing difficulty, please go to a hospital immediately, and make sure your breathing is stabilised with oxygen.



- 3) Even if you do not develop breathing difficulty, but fever, cough or other symptoms do not respond to medication for two days, please go to a hospital immediately, and request for an immediate admission.
- 4) Make sure your relative or you inform one of the four-designated Peer Mentors for COVID-19 - Anurag Kumar (97711 60748), Imran Khan (95030 70230), Dr Komal Kamra (98717 71417), or S Vaidyanathan (97909 36844) so that additional guidance can be sourced from rehabilitation experts, if needed.

If any person at home contracts COVID-19, the person with spinal cord injury must also self-isolate immediately for at least 21 days.

If your caregiver (a family member or a hired person) contracts COVID-19, he or she cannot be your caregiver for at least 21 days. You must find an alternative option.

If the person with spinal cord injury has a COVID-19 infection, wear an appropriate mask to enhance safety for others around you.

If anybody in your home has a COVID-19 infection, the person with spinal cord injury must always wear a mask for at least 14 days.

#### **Till...**

Till the point of absolute safety is reached (hopefully with a vaccine) social distancing plus washing hands with soap and water, not touching the face with palms and/or fingers, coughing into the creek of your elbow and having breakfast before 9:00 AM are the most effective ways of staying safe.

Stay at Home. Stay Safe.

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