VA Puget Sound Spinal Cord Injury

Patient Orientation Guide

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
VA Puget Sound Health Care System

VA Puget Sound Spinal Cord Injury Unit
Patient Orientation Guide

Letter from the Director

Welcome to the VA Puget Sound Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Unit. Here at the VA Puget Sound SCI Unit, we recognize that it is essential for people with SCI to receive healthcare, including primary care, from providers who are knowledgeable about the medical consequences and special considerations associated with the condition. For that reason, each of our providers is specially trained in SCI care.

Our mission is to promote the health, independence, and quality of life for people with SCI as well as to educate and train the future leaders in SCI care. With comprehensive treatments and healthcare solutions, we strive to deliver the best care available for our Veterans.

As director of the SCI service for Veterans from Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington, I am proud to welcome you to the VA Puget Sound SCI Unit!

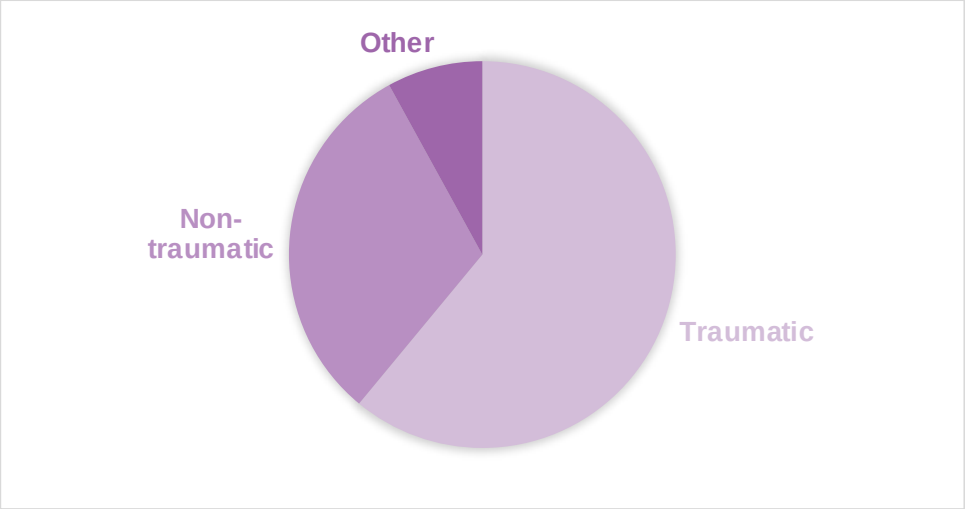
Stephen Burns, MD
Director of SCI Services
VA Puget Sound Health Care System

Spinal Cord Injury Overview

What is SCI?

A SCI is an injury to the spinal cord. The spinal cord is a collection of nervous tissue that runs from the base of the brain down the spine and transmits signals between the brain and the body. An injury to the spinal cord can cause weak or paralyzed muscles, altered sensation, and changes to the function of the bladder, bowel, lungs, and even the heart which may be permanent.

Causes of SCI in Veterans



Numbers

17,900
New traumatic SCI cases annually in the United States

296,000
Americans currently living with traumatic SCI

67 years
Average age of Veterans with SCI/D

17,500
Number of Veterans with traumatic or non-traumatic SCI/D

Mission Statement

To promote the health, independence, productivity and quality of life for Veterans with spinal cord injuries.

Services Provided at VA Puget Sound SCI Service

The VA Puget Sound SCI Service provides care for Veterans with SCI from Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. Patient care includes the diagnosis and treatment of illness, promotion of health, patient advocacy, and Veteran/family education. Care is provided in a collaborative, interdisciplinary manner by the medical providers, nursing staff, and other health care professionals.

Acute Rehabilitation

Acute rehabilitation services are provided to eligible Veterans when there is a reasonable expectation that rehabilitation will result in increased function, reduced barriers to participation, and improved quality of life for the Veteran and their family.

Education

Organized education programs are provided in the areas of health and well-being, bowel and bladder management, sexual and reproductive function, prevention of pressure injuries, medication management, psychological and social issues, and more.

Discharge Planning

The SCI Service will coordinate discharge and follow-up with physicians, therapies, psychology, and other providers as needed. Plans will be made for all necessary health and equipment maintenance.

Outpatient Care

Outpatient care includes annual evaluations where the Veteran is seen by each discipline on the SCI team. Routine primary and SCI specialty care is delivered in collaboration with a SCI primary care provider, outpatient physical, occupational, and recreation therapy, psychosocial services, and home health care for those who qualify. Subspecialty providers are available when necessary.

Additional Services Available

Hospital Resources

- SCI Inpatient Unit and SCI Outpatient Clinic in one location
- Independent living apartment to practice independent living
- Specialty care consultations
- Respite care for caregiver relief
- Therapists, nurses, dietitians, social workers, psychologists, and spiritual care providers with clinical specialty certification
- Hospice care

Community Reintegration

- Vocational rehabilitation for return-to-work training
- Driver's rehabilitation
- Sports and leisure education programs

Healthcare Support

- Telehealth options for outpatient appointments
- Secure email messaging with our SCI team
- SCI support groups for Veterans and family
- Social work assistance with VA and community resources

Research & Academics

- Active SCI research with more than 100 publications in the field of SCI medicine
- SCI team members involved in local and national SCI-related education and advocacy activities

SCI Care Team

Medical Team

Medical and medication management

The medical team consists of a SCI physician who directs the Veteran's care. You may also be seen by fellow and resident physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants. Other members of the medical team include pharmacists and subspecialty consult physicians.

Nursing Team

Nursing management and self-care

The nursing team includes clinical nurse specialists, advanced nurse practitioners, nurse educators, registered nurses, licensed nurse practitioners, and nursing assistants. Each nurse has a specific role in the care of the Veteran.

Therapy Team

Functional and therapy management

The therapy team incorporates physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech/language pathologists, and recreational therapists. They evaluate functional status and implement a therapy program and equipment training to maximize the Veteran's level of function and quality of life.

Psychosocial Team

Adjustment and psychological management

SCI psychologists, social workers, and chaplains form the psychosocial team. They support Veterans and their families' mental health as well as assist in stress management and effective coping with spinal cord injury.

SCI Unit Contact Numbers

Inpatient SCI Unit
206-764-2622

Outpatient SCI Clinic
206-764-2542

SCI Nurse Manager
206-764-2342

Therapy Manager
206-277-6909

Administrative Office
206-277-4469

Director, Spinal Cord Injury Service
206-764-2332

Patient Advocate
Seattle: 206-762-1010 x62160
American Lake: 206-762-1010 x76785

Billing & Insurance Questions
1-866-290-4618

Paralyzed Veterans of America Service Office
206-768-5415

Toll Free Number for VA Puget Sound
1-800-329-8387

Veterans Crisis Line
1-800-273-8255 (press 1 for Veteran's line)

Types of Admissions

Rehabilitation for New SCI

Once a Veteran is medically stable after their initial spinal cord injury, they may benefit from acute rehabilitation. This is a period of intensive therapy (usually 3+ hours per day, 5 days per week) on the SCI Unit in the hospital. Some patients benefit from receiving less intensive (subacute) rehabilitation. Individualized treatment intensity and goals will be determined based on evaluations by the SCI team.

- *Advanced Rehabilitation:* A type of acute rehabilitation where the Veteran is admitted to the SCI Unit, then leaves the hospital, and is readmitted after a few months to work on additional goals. This is often needed when someone has activity restrictions from their injury, such as the need for a spinal brace.

Initial Evaluation

If a Veteran is new to the VA Puget Sound area or has been newly identified as qualifying for the services of the SCI Unit, they may be offered an admission to be thoroughly evaluated by the SCI team.

Annual Evaluation

Once a year, Veterans with SCI are evaluated by the SCI team to address any needs or concerns they may have. This may be done as an outpatient, inpatient, or via telehealth depending on the needs of the Veteran.

Therapy Admission

There may be times when a Veteran may experience changes in their function, ability to care for themselves, or have new equipment needs. These issues may best be addressed with an admission for therapy, family training, and equipment evaluations.

Medical and Surgical Admission

If a Veteran with SCI is admitted for a medical condition or to receive surgery, efforts will be made for them to be admitted to the SCI Unit, unless they require treatment in an intensive care unit.

Respite Admission

Veterans requiring attendant care are eligible to receive respite care in the SCI Center or in a community setting. Respite care is recognized as an important provision for families and caregivers of Veterans with SCI.

Hospice Admission

Individuals can admit to the SCI unit for palliative treatment and end-of-life care, focusing on the Veteran's goals of care and life plans in a supportive and holistic environment.

Admission Packing List

Current List of Medications

Include herbal supplements and over-the-counter medications, as well as dosages of all medications.

Clothing

While we do have hospital gowns and pants on the unit, we encourage you to bring your own clothes so you can be more comfortable. We recommend labeling your items. Some suggestions include:

- Machine washable t-shirts, elastic waist pants or shorts
- Tennis shoes or other comfortable shoes that will stay on your feet
- Socks
- Coat, hat, and gloves for outdoor activities

Equipment

Bring any specialized equipment you use at home, such as a wheelchair, catheter supplies not prescribed by VA, CPAP, wrist or foot splints, glasses, hearing aids, and dentures.

Optional

Optional items include:

- Laptop computer, cell phone, or other small electronics. You will have a bedside table with a lock where items can be stored, but please note the VA is not responsible for lost, stolen, or damaged items during your stay. Please bring any necessary chargers.
- Small amount of cash for vending machines or canteen purchases. You may utilize the VA agent cashier for larger amounts.
- Copy of Advanced Care Directive

Do Not Bring

Some items not to bring include:

- Clothing which might restrict movement
- Items that you would be upset to lose or have damaged during your hospital stay
- Refrigerators, coffee makers, or any kitchen appliances

Concerns and Complaints

The SCI team strives to be responsive to all concerns of Veterans for whom we provide care. Our priority is to address concerns with the parties involved. If this has already been attempted or the Veteran is uncomfortable with bringing their concerns to this person, the individual made aware of the complaint will offer to share the Veteran's concern with the team physician, SCI Nurse Manager, or other appropriate individual to mediate the problem. Every effort will be made to respond within 24 hours of the expressed concern. If the concern is not resolved to their satisfaction, the Veteran may be referred to the Patient Advocate (Seattle Campus, Building 100, Room 1D142, phone (206)764-2160).

All formal written complaints pertaining to the SCI program will be referred to the Director, Spinal Cord Injury Service for review. Responses to formal complaints will be made within two weeks of receipt of the formal complaint. If the investigation has not been completed within the two-week time frame, the SCI Director will notify the person served by letter or telephone that the investigation is continuing, and a response will be forthcoming within a specified time frame.

Verbal or physical abuse or sexual harassment, whether direct or indirect, of Veterans or staff is not tolerated. All concerns of abuse or harassment should be reported to the SCI Director, SCI Nurse Manager, or Patient Advocate.

SCI Unit Rules

In order to ensure the safety and well-being of all our Veterans, we require that all patients abide by the following rules while receiving care on the SCI Unit.

1. Veterans may leave the facility on pass with approval of a SCI physician or advanced practice provider. Veterans must return by a specified time.
2. Use of alcohol or non-prescription drugs is not allowed while on pass. Returning from pass under the influence will not be tolerated.
3. Use or possession of alcohol or non-prescription drugs is prohibited on the SCI Unit or anywhere on VA property.
4. Federal law prohibits the use or possession of any illicit drugs, including marijuana, on VA property.
5. Tobacco smoking is prohibited on all VA property. This is a non-smoking campus.
6. It is required that Veterans be on time and participate in scheduled medical and therapy appointments.
7. Verbal or physical abuse or sexual harassment, whether direct or indirect, of other Veterans or staff is not tolerated.
8. Quiet hours are from 10PM to 6AM. Please minimize noise and activity during this time.

Typical Day on the SCI Unit

08:00 AM	Breakfast – usually in bed
08:45 AM	Nursing care
09:00 AM	Occupational therapy
10:00 AM	Physical therapy
11:00 AM	Patient education group
12:00 PM	Lunch
01:00 PM	Vocational counseling, social work, psychology, or recreational therapy
02:00 PM	Occupational therapy
03:00 PM	Physical therapy
05:00 PM	Dinner
06:00 PM	Nursing care
08:00 PM	Education with nursing – informal
10:00 PM	Ready for bed

Discharge Planning

Planning for discharge may seem overwhelming when you have just arrived to the SCI Unit. However, we recommend you begin thinking about discharge early in order to allow enough time to plan for your needs following hospitalization.

We recommend reading the chapters on discharge planning and accessibility in the *Yes, You Can!* manual which will be provided to you upon admission to the SCI Unit. These chapters provide helpful worksheets that can be useful for discharge planning.

Things to consider when planning for discharge are where to live, additional assistance that may be needed from caregivers, and the plan for medical follow up (see below).

We understand that discharge planning can be stressful for you and your family. Remember, your SCI team is here to help!

Where to Live

Discharge location will be influenced by your home environment prior to admission, the level of assistance needed at home, your support system, and your preferences.

- Your social worker will help identify options and address financial aspects of your particular situation.
- Your therapists will make recommendations about potential modifications and accessibility considerations for your discharge location.

Caregiver Assistance

Our goal is to help you become as independent as possible after your SCI. If there are aspects of your daily life with which you need assistance at discharge, it will be recommended that you have additional assistance from a caregiver.

- Your nurse and therapists will provide training to caregivers, if needed.
- Your social worker will help you to identify potential resources to hire a caregiver if a family member or friend is not available.

Medical Follow Up

Most people continue to utilize our team for SCI care upon discharge. Prior to discharge, you will be assigned a SCI physician that will follow you in the SCI Outpatient Clinic. This person will be your primary point of contact for SCI questions and care after discharge.

- If you live in Western Washington, the SCI Outpatient Clinic can also serve as your primary care team. Otherwise, we will help identify a local care provider.

My HealtheVet

My HealtheVet is the VA secure messaging system which allows you to:

- Communicate directly with the SCI team
- Refill prescriptions
- Request or reschedule appointments
- Access your health care records

The SCI/D Telehealth Coordinator will help you sign up for My HealtheVet prior to discharge.

www.myhealth.va.gov

SCI Outpatient Rehabilitation Program

"Once you choose hope, anything's possible."
- Christopher Reeve

VA Puget Sound SCI Service offers a comprehensive outpatient rehabilitation program. The SCI outpatient team includes a SCI medical provider, nursing staff, physical, occupational, recreational therapists, social workers, and psychologists. In addition to these services, we offer driver's and vocational rehabilitation to facilitate community reintegration. Services are delivered in-person and virtually, when appropriate.

FAQ

The SCI unit staff are available to answer any questions you and your loved ones may have regarding your diagnosis, treatment plan, and care while on the unit. Below are some frequently asked questions.

1. **How long will I be in the hospital?**
   The length of stay varies from person to person and is determined by many factors including reason for admission, medical complexity, degree of disability, and necessary training and education. The average length of stay after a new spinal cord injury is 2-3 months.
2. **How will I get my medications after discharge?**
   You will be sent home with a 30-90 day supply of medications and medical supplies. How the supplies are refilled after discharge will depend on where you will receive your primary care. Your medical team will work with you to ensure close follow up after discharge.
3. **How many days a week will I receive therapy?**
   The amount of therapy provided will depend on your needs and the reason for admission. Therapy is available Monday-Saturday. There is no therapy on Sundays.
4. **What amenities are available on the SCI unit?**
   WiFi internet access is available in patient rooms. Patients can bring their own laptop computer or use the public computers in the dayroom.
   - There is a washer and dryer on the unit for patient clothing. Laundry soap is also available.
   - There is a television mounted to every hospital bed.
   - The unit has a limited number of snacks and beverages available. There is a canteen, a coffee stand, and vending machines near the unit.

"Where you are now is not where you will always be. Just keep on trying and know that tomorrow really is a new day."
- Jen Goodwin
180 Medical Blog
Spinal cord injury – 2008

"Having received services at the Seattle VA Spinal Cord Injury inpatient and outpatient units, I've come to appreciate the superb care and kind treatment received from all whom I've had the privilege of working with."
- Veteran with tetraplegia
Published with consent

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