

# Spasticity triggers

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## Information for patients

### What is spasticity?

Spasticity is caused by damage to the brain or spinal cord. This may be due to conditions such as brain injury, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis and stroke. Muscles become over-active, causing tightness, stiffness and spasms.

How body parts are affected by spasticity depends on the area and degree of damage to the brain or spinal cord. Physical effects can range from mild stiffness to painful spasms. Spasticity can affect a small area of the body, such as an ankle or a hand, or a greater part of the body.

Spasticity can make some activities difficult, such as walking, washing and dressing, or moving in bed. Spasticity can vary from day to day and throughout the day. It can be present all the time, or can come and go.

### What are spasticity triggers?

Spasticity can worsen significantly as a result of the influence of a number of factors. These are called trigger factors. If the trigger factor is managed appropriately the influence on your spasticity may ease. If the trigger factor is not managed appropriately this can lead to worsening of your symptoms, unnecessary medication changes or secondary problems such as your muscles becoming tighter or shortened. This may result in changes in your function.

Here are some common trigger factors:

### Bladder problems

- **Urinary tract infection:** Symptoms of a urinary tract infection may include: going to the toilet more often than usual; pain on passing urine; unpleasant smell from your urine; general feeling of being unwell. If you have a catheter you may notice a change in colour or smell of your urine. If you notice any of these symptoms you should take a sample of your urine to your GP practice for testing.
- **Catheter problems:** If your catheter is causing pain or is blocking or bypassing you should contact your District Nurse for support.
- **Bladder not emptying:** Repeated visits to the toilet to empty your bladder over a short period of time, feeling that you need to pass urine again almost immediately after you have just been, or having difficulty starting the flow of urine may mean that your bladder is not emptying well. This can irritate the bladder and increase the risk of infection. You may need referral to the Bladder and Bowel Nurses for further assessment. Your GP can help with this.

## **Bowel problems**

- **Constipation:** Symptoms of constipation may include: moving your bowels less often than your normal; difficulty moving your bowels; passing hard stools with effort. You should contact your GP for advice about how to manage constipation.
- **Other bowel problems:** Bowel problems such as irritable bowel syndrome can also impact on your spasticity. Your GP may be able to help with appropriate treatment.

## **Skin problems**

- **Skin irritation:** Anything rubbing on your skin can cause irritation, redness or blistering. This can include: friction from footwear; rubbing from a splint; tight clothing e.g. socks. It is important to deal with the cause of any skin irritation so that it does not worsen, as it could develop into skin breakdown or infection.
- **Skin breakdown:** Pressure on your skin can affect your circulation and can lead to skin damage and breakdown. This can happen if you have difficulty in moving around and changing position. This may be worsened if you do not have good sensation and do not feel discomfort from pressure. It is important to check your skin regularly for signs of damage. If you are concerned about your skin, you should speak to your GP, practice nurse or district nurse for advice.
- **Burns:** A burn to your skin can cause worsening of spasticity. It is important that any burns are properly treated as you may be at risk of developing an infection. Seek advice from your GP, practice nurse or district nurse.
- **Feet:** Things like ingrown toenails and fungal infections of the toenails can impact on spasticity. If you have any problems with your feet you should consider self-referral to Podiatry. You can find out about self-referral to Podiatry at your GP surgery.

## **Infection**

- Common types of infection are: urinary tract infections; chest infections; infections in the mouth or teeth and common illnesses such as colds, flu or tummy bugs. If you think you have persisting symptoms from an infection you should seek advice from your GP.

## **Pain and discomfort**

- **New or unexplained pain:** This should be checked by your GP. They can prescribe pain medication and refer you for further investigation or treatment if needed. The type of pain you describe will guide which pain medication to use.
- **Discomfort from lying or sitting:** If you have difficulty in moving around or changing your position you may experience discomfort. This can mean you have pressure points on certain parts of your body and may increase your risk of skin breakdown (see above).

## **Other triggers**

- **Extremes of temperature:** being too hot or too cold can cause spasticity to worsen. Trying to keep your temperature as constant as possible can help e.g. wrapping up in warm layers in cold weather.
- **Emotional issues:** Being stressed or anxious about something can make spasticity worse. Being aware of your feelings can help, as can speaking to someone about any particular issues you have. Techniques such as relaxation and mindfulness can be useful. You can seek advice from your GP about managing emotional issues.

**If you have any questions about spasticity triggers, you may contact:**

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