Autonomic Hyperreflexia

Autonomic hyperreflexia is a sudden nervous system response to pain or other things that irritate the body. It can happen to people with a spinal cord injury at or above the thoracic six level. Autonomic hyperreflexia is a medical emergency. It causes a rise in the blood pressure so high that it can cause death if not taken care of right away.

Other names for this condition are:

- Autonomic dysreflexia
- Hyperreflexia

What causes hyperreflexia?

It may be caused by any irritation below the level of injury, such as:

- A full bladder
- A full bowel or constipation
- Bladder infection or bladder stones
- Genital stimulation
- Pain
- Tight clothing or shoes
- Tests done on the bladder
- Labor and delivery
Broken bones
Ingrown toenails
Pressure sore or skin infection
Abdominal problems like gall stones, appendicitis, kidney stones or ulcers

What are common signs?
- Sudden severe rise in blood pressure
- Pounding headache
- A change in heart rate
- Flushed skin or shivering above the level of injury
- Anxious feeling
- Sweating above or below the level of injury
- Blurred vision
- Stuffy nose
- Pale skin or goose bumps below the level of injury

What do I need to do when this happens?
- Sit up and raise your head.
- Empty your bladder.
- Remove tight clothing, leg bag straps and shoes. Undress from your feet up and check your skin for anything that could irritate or cause pain.
- If you have a catheter, look for kinks or a full drainage bag.
- Change the catheter.
- If you do not have a catheter, gently catheterize yourself.
- Check the bowel and gently remove any stool 3 minutes after using Xylocaine jelly.

If the signs do not stop, call your doctor or go to the emergency room.
How can I lessen the chances of this happening?

- Do your regular schedule of bladder and bowel programs.
- Do routine skin care and nail care.
- Avoid extreme heat or cold.
- Take prescribed medicines.
- Know your normal blood pressure.
- Keep the autonomic hyperreflexia wallet card with you at all times.

What do I do if the signs do not go away?

- Take the medicines ordered by your doctor for hyperreflexia. Certain medicines to lower blood pressure that act quickly and last a short period of time may be prescribed such as:
  - Nitropaste, a type of nitroglycerin, placed topically on the surface of your body. Your doctor may order this medicine to be wiped off once your blood pressure improves to lessen chance of your blood pressure falling too low. This medicine is not an option for you if you have taken any Viagra, Revatio, Levitra, or Staxyn within 24 hrs, or Cialis within 48 hrs. Tell your doctor if you take any of these medicines.
  - Procardia, a brand of nifedipine, your doctor may instruct you to “bite and swallow” this medicine for more regular absorption in your body.
- Call your doctor and go to the emergency department.
- Tell the doctor or emergency department staff about your signs, what you have done and how your signs changed.

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.