

Autonomic Dysreflexia



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
WEXNER MEDICAL CENTER

Autonomic dysreflexia 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 that is **at or above the thoracic six level (T6)**. It is a medical emergency that causes a rise in blood pressure so high that it can cause death if not taken care of right away. This condition may also be called autonomic hyperreflexia.

Causes

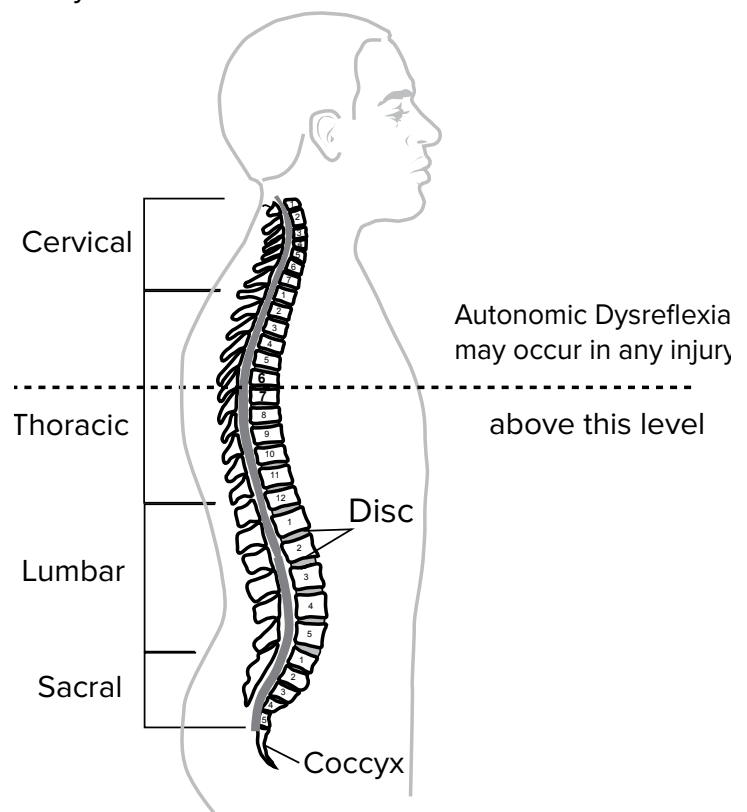
Autonomic dysreflexia may be caused by any irritation to the body that happens below the place of the spinal cord injury. Irritations can be caused by:

- A full bladder (most common cause)
- 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

Signs

You may have one or more of the following 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 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 in, gently catheterize yourself.
- Check the rectum and gently remove any stool 3 minutes after using Xylocaine jelly.

What to do if the signs do not go away

- Take the medicines ordered by your doctor for dysreflexia. 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, is placed on the skin. Your doctor may order this medicine to be wiped off once your blood pressure improves to reduce the chance of your blood pressure falling too low. This medicine is not an option if you have taken Viagra, Revatio, Levitra, or Staxyn within 24 hours, or Cialis within 48 hours. Tell your doctor if you take any of these medicines.
 - Procardia, a brand of nifedipine, that your doctor may instruct you to “bite and swallow” 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 have changed.

How to lessen your 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 wallet card with you at all times

Autonomic dysreflexia is a serious medical emergency. Know the signs and what to do if it happens. Carry the autonomic dysreflexia wallet card given to you at the hospital to help you react quickly. You can also get a copy at patienteducation.osumc.edu.

Talk to your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

For more health information, contact the Library for Health Information at **614-293-3707** or e-mail **health-info@osu.edu**.