
What is autonomic dysreflexia?

Autonomic dysreflexia (AD) is a serious condition that can happen in people with spinal cord injuries (most often above the T6 level). AD is caused by an irritant or problem below the level of the spinal cord injury. The nervous system cannot react as it should due to the spinal cord injury, so a severe reaction can happen.

AD can threaten your child's life and needs attention right away!

What causes it?

Some common causes of AD include:

- A full bladder (usual cause) or urinary tract infection (UTI)
- A full rectum
- Pressure on the skin or pressure injury
- Tight or wrinkled clothes
- Tight socks or shoes
- An ingrown toenail
- Stomach (belly) pain or menstrual cramps
- Gallstones
- Pregnancy
- Testicular torsion
- Skin sores, wounds or sunburn

What are the signs?

Your child may have 1 or more of these:

- Severe (very bad), pounding headache due to high blood pressure
- Flushed (reddened) face and skin above the level of spinal cord injury
- Vision problems, such as blurred vision or dilated pupils (black circle in middle of the eye gets big)
- Nasal congestion (stuffy nose) when not sick
- Nausea
- Chills without fever
- Sweating and skin blotching **above** the level of the spinal cord injury
- Cool, pale skin and goosebumps **below** the level of the spinal cord injury
- Anxiety
- Low heart rate (slow pulse). Talk with your child's doctor about what is normal for your child.
- Seizures

If you notice any of these signs, **take action right away**.

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Autonomic dysreflexia, continued

What is the treatment?

Talk with your child's doctor about specific care for your child. Some guidelines to follow include:

- Your child should **NOT** lay down but instead, stay seated in a wheelchair. If in bed, have them sit up and keep their head raised at least 45 degrees.
- Check your child's bladder:
 - If your child has an indwelling catheter, check to make sure urine is flowing freely. Check for kinks or blocks in the tube or overfilling of the drainage bag. Irrigate or replace the catheter as advised by your child's doctor if it is not draining well.
 - If your child does intermittent catheterizations (CIC), complete a CIC to drain the bladder as advised by your child's doctor.
 - If your child wears a condom catheter, check to make sure it is not too tight and urine is flowing freely. If needed, remove it, and catheterize your child's bladder.
- Check your child's bowel:
 - Check for stool in the rectum.
 - If needed, remove the stool. Use manual removal or digital stimulation (dig stim) as advised by your child's doctor.
- Check your child's skin:
 - Remove tight clothes, socks or shoes.
 - Check for pressure on the skin.
 - Change your child's position or perform a weight shift while they stay sitting (do not lay down).
- Give any medicines as ordered by your child's doctor.

When should I call the doctor?

If your child's condition improves, call the doctor as soon as you can. **If your child's condition does not improve after you try these steps, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department RIGHT AWAY.**

How can I help prevent AD?

Talk with your child's doctor about specific care for your child. Some guidelines to help prevent AD include:

- Change your child's position or perform weight shifts as advised by your child's doctor. This is to help prevent pressure on the skin. Do skin checks each day to check for pressure spots.
- Keep up with a bowel and bladder program. This is to help prevent infections and overstretching of tissues.
- Keep catheters and supplies clean and in good working order.
- Use sunscreen (SPF 15 or greater) when outside.
- Prevent burns and scalds to the skin.
- Keep toenails trimmed.
- Keep linens and clothes clean and wrinkle free. Avoid tight clothes and clothing seams.

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's healthcare team about specific care of your child.

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.