

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Spinal Cord Injuries and Disorders (SCI/D) System of Care: Information for Veterans with SCI/D During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency

Tip Sheet

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recognizes that new COVID-19 related information and guidance is being released frequently. For the most up-to date information, please visit: [VA COVID-19 Guidance](#) or [CDC COVID-19 Guidance](#). The VA Spinal Cord Injuries and Disorders (SCI/D) System of Care further recognizes the unique needs of Veterans with a spinal cord injury or disorder during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

Your health and well-being are important to us and we recognize that you may have concerns about the ways in which COVID-19 may affect you as a person living with SCI/D. The VA SCI/D System of Care continues to provide support during this challenging time. Your [SCI/D care team or local SCI/D clinic](#) can connect you to important resources and services; do not hesitate to call to learn more.

During this time, it is important to be prepared. Make a plan to [protect and take care of yourself](#).

Plan

- Check your medications and supplies. Submit refills or requests for renewals via the call-in number (1-877-327-0022) or [My HealthVet](#).
- Take advantage of [telehealth](#) and other virtual health care options by contacting your healthcare team to learn more about what services may be available.
- Create a [list](#) to identify what help you might need. Consider emergency plans and resources for the following:
 - **Personal care/management** (e.g. bowel and bladder management, wounds) – arrange a back-up caregiver plan, should your caregiver(s) fall ill or be unavailable for other reasons. If an agency provides your caregiver, does the agency have backup caregivers? If you have a private caregiver, discuss plans for who can fill in if one or more of your caregivers is not available;
 - **Oxygen/ventilator** – notify the local emergency management system, electric company and telephone company/mobile telephone service;
 - **Equipment** (wheelchairs, assistive devices, etc.) – review status, and identify backup solutions and who to contact in case of emergency;
 - **Telephone** (land line and/or mobile);
 - **Utilities and rent/mortgage**;
 - **Transportation**;
 - **Groceries** – it is important to make as few trips as possible to the grocery store. Have an adequate supply of food so you are prepared to stay home for some time. Contact your [SCI/D care team or local SCI/D clinic](#) for information on community resources;
 - **Personal care items** (e.g. toiletries, bowel and bladder, wound);
 - **Household supplies**.
- Tell people who may need to help you in an emergency on how to operate your equipment and perform care. Have an [autonomic dysreflexia card](#) available in case of emergency.
- Make sure you have close access to a telephone and/or medical alert system to call for help in case of emergency. A medical alert system can be ordered by your provider.
- Keep records and important information about your care, including an [Advanced Care Plan](#), in a safe and accessible place. Make sure you share the location or a copy of the plan with appropriate family or friends.

- Identify a personal support network of at least three people you trust that can provide help quickly and reliably. Contact family and friends who can assist with grocery shopping, pharmacy pick-ups or other essentials.
- Contact your [SCI/D care team or local SCI/D clinic](#) for resources and/or treatment options available for symptoms of bladder or bowel complications or other SCI/D related complications, to prevent emergency room and urgent care trips.

Protect yourself

- Wash your hands (or receive assistance to wash your hands) with soap and water for at least 20 seconds after you have been in a public place or after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
 - If soap and water are not readily available, **use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol**. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together (or receive assistance) until they feel dry.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces, objects and equipment (ex. wheelchair surfaces and other assistive technology) often.
- Maintain social distancing. Keep a distance of 6 feet between you and other people whenever possible.
- Follow [CDC](#), State and/or local guidelines regarding face coverings when you are in public settings. If you are unable to place a covering on your face independently, ask your caregiver, friend, or family for assistance with placement of the covering on your face.
- Limit the number of people (including caregivers and family) entering your home.
- Make sure anyone entering your home and/or providing care for you observes all the precautions you are taking (i.e. hand washing, hand sanitizing) and self-care procedures. Request that they monitor themselves for any symptoms of COVID-19 and consider wearing a mask or face covering when providing care for you.
- For emergencies, call 911.
- For essential community services (ex. food, water, shelter), call [211](#).

Take action if you are sick

- Monitor yourself for symptoms related to suspected COVID-19:
 - Fever;
 - New or worsening cough;
 - New or worsening shortness of breath;
 - New diarrhea;
 - New muscle and/or back pain;
 - New loss of taste;
 - New loss of smell;
 - New nausea;
 - New conjunctivitis;
 - New muscle pain.
- If you feel sick, contact your [VA care team or local SCI/D clinic](#), [VA medical center](#), or the VA Call Center at 1-800-856-3384 right away for guidance and medical advice. Contacting VA before visiting helps protect you, medical staff, and other patients.
 - Ask your VA health care team when you call if you can have a [telehealth](#) appointment instead of an in-person visit.

Take care of yourself

Taking care of yourself, including your mental health, is essential during this time. Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. Many people may experience fear, anxiety, or feelings of depression. This is normal. There are things that you can do to manage these experiences and practice good self-care:

- Get fresh air every day, even if this means opening the windows and turning on a fan – as long as you do not get overly chilled or too hot.
- Find ways to move your body, as you are able.
- Drink plenty of water and eat good, nutritious foods.
- Limit alcohol intake and refrain from using recreational drugs.
- Do not smoke or use tobacco products.
- Create a routine that includes getting plenty of [sleep](#) and waking up at a consistent time.
- Practice breathing exercises and/or meditation. Download one of VA's many [free mental health apps for Veterans](#).
 - [COVID Coach](#) is designed to help build resilience, manage stress, and increase well-being during this crisis. The app is free and secure, and it helps connect users to important resources for coping and adapting during the COVID-19 pandemic. You don't need an account or password, and your data is not collected.
 - [Mood Coach](#) is designed to help boost your mood through participation in positive activities. You can make a plan with positive activities and track your progress.
- Stay connected with others while practicing social distancing. Maintaining relationships helps to manage feelings of anxiety and promotes mental health self-care.
 - Seek support from family, friends, mentors, clergy, and those who are in similar circumstances. Face-to-face communication may not be possible, so be flexible and creative using phone, email, text messaging, and video calls.
 - Sign up or join a virtual social network. There are specific [online communities](#) for people living with spinal cord injuries and disorders. These forums include both Veterans and civilians that live with SCI/D.
- Participate in activities or hobbies that you enjoy or learn a new one.
- Reach out for professional support, often available via telephone, telehealth or other virtual communication.
- Limit the amount of time you watch COVID-19 related news stories and use reputable sources.

VA Resources

[VA's COVID-19 page](#): This is VA's home for all COVID resources and information about VA's response.

[Frequently asked questions for Veterans about accessing VA health benefits during COVID-19](#): These FAQs are updated frequently with information and guidance for Veterans about different ways to access VA health benefits during the COVID-19 outbreak.

[VA mental health resources & guidance for Veterans during the COVID-19 outbreak](#): This page has helpful guidance, articles, and applications as well as instructions for Veterans about accessing mental health care during the COVID-19 outbreak.

[VA PTSD & Managing Stress COVID-19](#): This site gives you practical steps and a printable handout for Veterans with PTSD and their families, to improve well-being related to increased stress and anxiety, as well as feelings of uncertainty.

[VA Mental Health Apps](#): This site has free apps to help Veterans maintain and enhance mental health and wellbeing.

VA Intimate Partner Violence Prevention COVID-19: This site has resources and supports when relationship conflict occurs and escalates during times of crisis.

VA Whole Health: This site has information about a new approach to care that supports Veteran health and well-being.

Additional Resources**

- National Disability COVID-19 Healthcare Advocacy and Rapid Response Support Hotline provides information for anyone who identifies as a person with a disability or has an access and functional need. Callers are prompted to leave a message indicating need. Return call within 24 hours from an expert familiar with disability crisis planning. (800) 626-4959, info@disasterstrategies.org
- [Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation](#)
- [Paralyzed Veterans of America](#)
- [United Spinal Association](#)
- [PATRIOT link](#) (resource navigation)
- [Rosalyn Carter Institute for Caregiving COVID-19 Tips](#)
- SesameStreer.org/caring (for young children)

Disclaimer: **This list is not all inclusive. Links will take you outside of the Department of Veterans Affairs. VA does not endorse and is not responsible for the content of the linked web sites.