

Autonomic Dysreflexia (AD) is a medical emergency specific to individuals with Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) at the neurological level of T6 or above. It is usually caused when a painful irritation occurs below the level of your spinal cord injury. It can present with a variety of signs / symptoms which can vary from mild to severe discomfort. As a SCI individual you need to have a good understanding of AD and be familiar with signs and symptoms and immediate management of this potentially life threatening condition. It must be addressed immediately because if it is untreated it may progress to cause a seizure, stroke or death. (Ahrens Prestice 1998).

CAUSES

Bladder

- Distension (due to catheter blockage or kinking)
- Urinary tract infection
- Bladder stones

Bowel

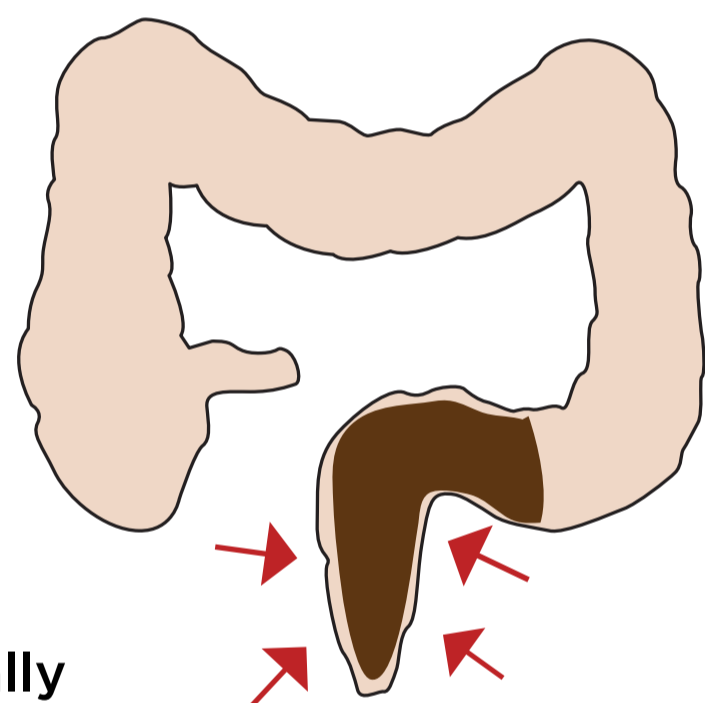
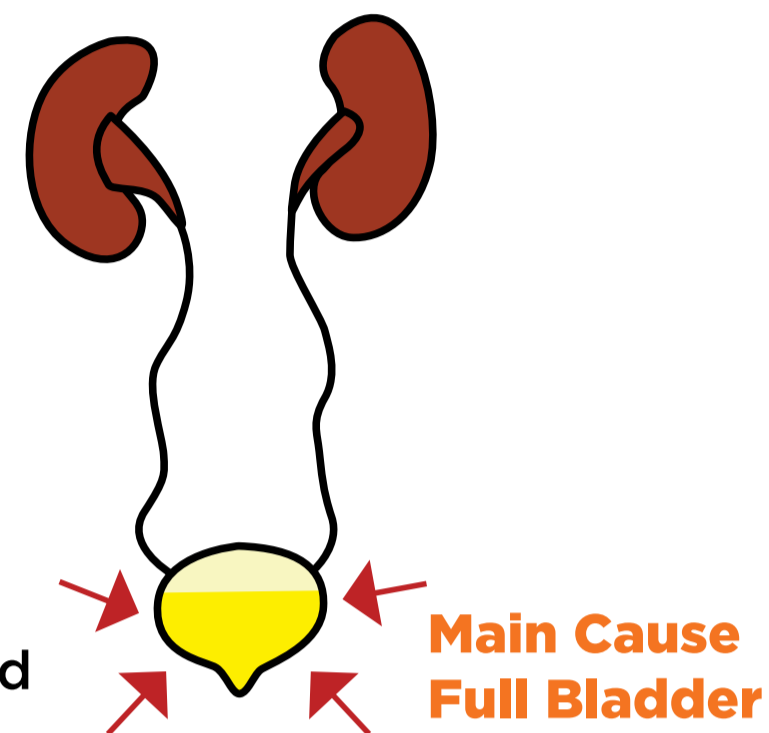
- Constipation
- Haemorrhoids
- Fissure
- Having bowel care performed

Skin

- Pressure Ulcer
- Tight Clothing
- Ingrown toenail
- Blister/burn

Others

- Scrotal compression
- Sexual stimulation
- Labour childbirth
- Menstruation and any condition that would usually cause abdominal pain



HOW DO I GET AUTONOMIC DYSREFLEXIA?

5. Slow pulse and dilatation of blood vessels above the injury level as an attempt to compensate for the rise in blood pressure causing symptoms

6. Attempted compensation message cannot pass through the spinal cord and blood pressure continues to rise

1. Irritation below the level of SCI such as a full bladder sends signals up the spine

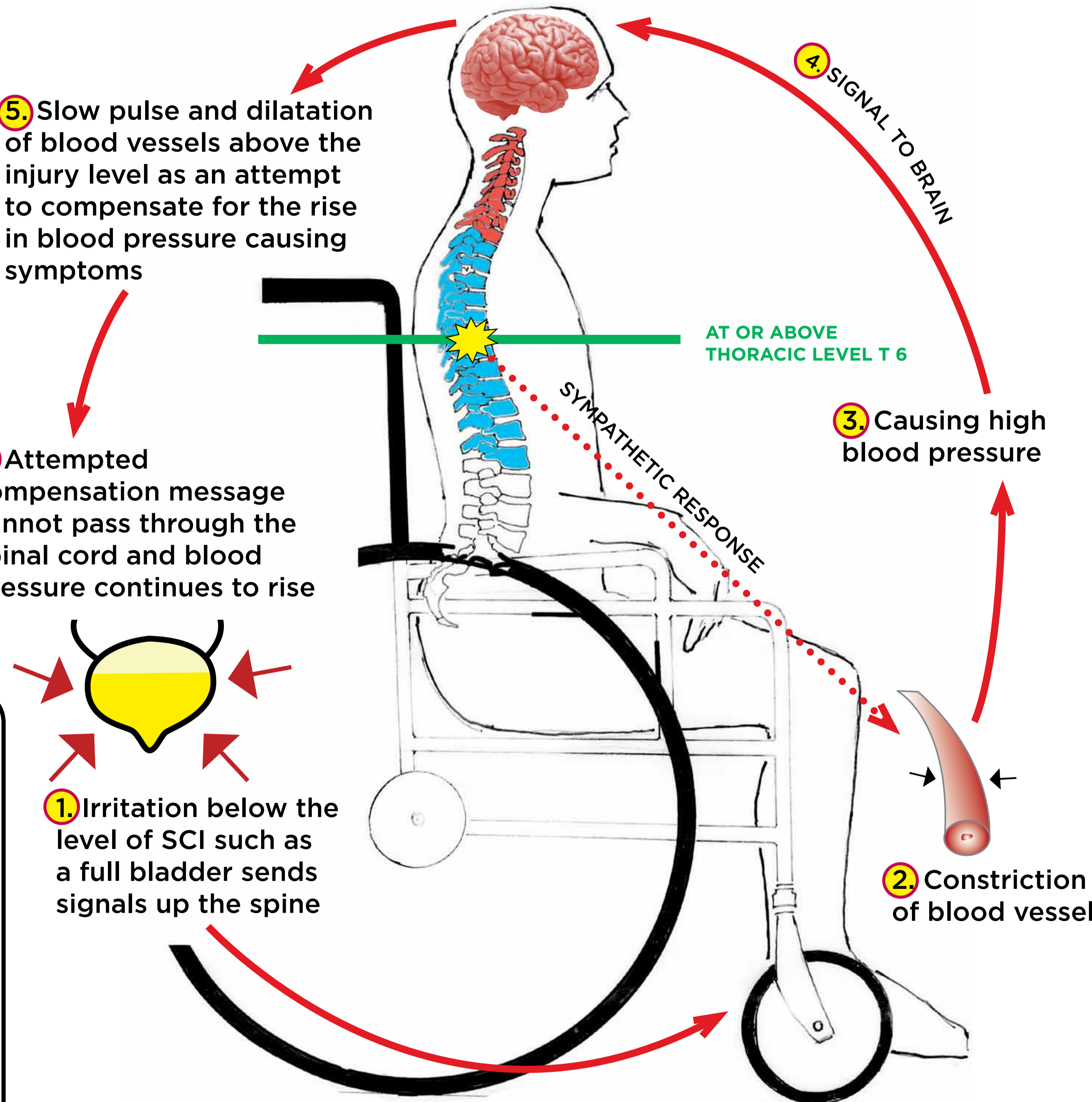
2. Constriction of blood vessel

3. Causing high blood pressure

4. SIGNAL TO BRAIN

AT OR ABOVE THORACIC LEVEL T 6

SYMPATHETIC RESPONSE



SIGNS & SYMPTOMS



BP 20-30mmHg ABOVE NORMAL



SWEATING



POUNGING HEADACHE



FLUSHED



TIGHT CHEST & STUFFY NOSE



BLURRED VISION

Emergency Treatment for Autonomic Dysreflexia

Signs / Symptoms of Autonomic Dysreflexia

Call for assistance - Sit upright and lower legs - Loosen any tight clothing / legs straps - Monitor BP until symptoms have resolved

Common causes to exclude / treat first are:

1. Bladder Distension - 2. Constipation

If symptoms persist and cause is unknown - Take prescribed medication - Nifedipine 10mg capsule "bite and swallow" method

If BP not settling and cause not identified Contact your GP or Accident / Emergency Department

CONCLUSION

It is essential for you, family members or carers to recognise and understand the potential causes, prevention and treatment of AD. If an episode of AD is identified quickly, and treated immediately the symptoms may then subside, thus removing the likelihood of complications.