Spinal Cord Injury and the Importance of Exercise for Cardiovascular Health

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The condition of exercise is not a mere variant of the condition of rest, it is the essence of the machine.

Sir Joseph Barcroft
Features in the Architecture of Physiological Function
1934
THE LONG TERM EFFECTS OF SPINAL CORD INJURY CAN RESEMBLE PREMATURE AGING

• Changes in the heart and blood vessels, in metabolism, and in the muscles and bones lead to early aging and result in cardiovascular diseases at earlier ages.
THE ROLE OF EXERCISE INTENSITY IN MAINTAINING HEALTH

- Cancer deaths occur less frequently in those who run versus those who walk.
- There is lower risk of respiratory disease with higher ‘doses’ of exercise.
- High blood pressure, high cholesterol, and high blood sugar occur less often in those who exercise more intensely.
- Death due to all causes is less in a direct relationship with more intense regular exercise.

By 1 year after discharge, exercise capacity in those with an SCI is less than half that in the unfit general population (Haisma. J Rehabil Med 2008)

“Physical rehabilitation after SCI needs to move beyond maximizing independence to focus on maintenance of optimum health and fitness”

CARDIOVASCULAR RISKS RELATED TO INACTIVITY AFTER SPINAL CORD INJURY

- Low levels of protective high-density cholesterol (HDL) and high levels of harmful low-density cholesterol (LDL)
- Loss of muscle mass
- Low resting metabolism and increased blood sugar
- Increased body fat (mainly stomach fat)

EXERCISE REDUCES CARDIOVASCULAR RISK AFTER SPINAL CORD INJURY

- Moderate to high intensity (not low-intensity) wheelchair or arm crank exercise training improves fitness and increases HDL
- Circuit training (resistance + aerobic exercise) can reduce cardiovascular risk by ~25%
- Both arm crank and circuit training can be effective to improve blood sugar
- Hand-cycling can reduce waist size and stomach fat
- Those who do 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise per week* have lower body fat than those who do not (*ACSM and WHO recommendation)

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KEY LIMITATION TO EXERCISE AFTER SCI: MUSCLE MASS

OVERCOMING EXERCISE LIMITATIONS IN SCI WITH FUNCTIONAL ELECTRICAL STIMULATION (FES)

‘E-Stim for Wellness,” Richard Holicky
New Mobility, Sep 2013

Taylor repeatedly emphasized that the program is exercise rather than therapy, and as an exercise physiologist, he believes meaningful exercise involves work, sweating and heavy breathing, a combination, he says, not often associated with the e-stim bike.’
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OVERCOMING EXERCISE LIMITATIONS IN SCI WITH FUNCTIONAL ELECTRICAL STIMULATION (FES)

“Our data suggest that the benefits of FES row training may lie in effectively circumventing the effect of SCI by engaging more muscle mass, independent of level of injury.”

EXERCISE -- THE ESSENCE OF THE MACHINE

“My grandmother started walking five miles a day when she was sixty. She's ninety-seven now, and we don't know where the heck she is.”

— Ellen DeGeneres