



How the Built and Natural Environment Can Help Adults Aging with Spinal Cord Injury

The average age of people living with spinal cord injury (SCI) is **increasing**, due in part to advances in medical care and technology. New research suggests that successful aging with SCI is a **complex process** that depends on different factors, including psychological adjustment, autonomy, access to health care, and staying connected with society. The latter has also been shown to be important for maintaining **meaningful life roles and activities** after SCI.

Social Integration and SCI

However, aging adults with SCI can experience greater constraints in both **informal** (e.g., visiting family and friends) and **organized** (e.g., going to church) **social activities**, particularly many years after their initial injury. The health challenges of premature aging, including fatigue, pressure sores, and pain, can make built and natural environmental barriers (e.g., gravel surfaces or icy sidewalks) **more challenging** for longer term survivors of SCI, which negatively affects social integration.

How Can the Community Help?

The results of this study show that **accessible community environments** are very important for the well-being and social integration of adults aging with SCI.

- **Facilitators in the built environment** (e.g., curb cuts, ramps, automatic doors, elevators, and paved surfaces) were important for both informal and formal social integration. These features were associated with twofold higher odds of regular social participation.
- **Natural features of the community environment**, including crowds, gravel surfaces, and winter weather, were significant barriers to informal social activities.

The way the **community is built and organized** plays a **significant role** in the likelihood of people with **SCI** engaging in social activities.

Accessible environment features made it

2x
MORE LIKELY

for people with disabilities to engage in society

The Built and Natural Environment

The World Health Organization developed the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health to create common ground to study disability. It focuses on the role of the environment (natural and human-made) and if it can help or hinder participation in society.





Call To Action

- It's important to invest in urban policies centered around accessibility.
- Regulations such as requiring snow to be cleared from streets and sidewalks may go a long way toward promoting social integration among those living with SCI.

SNAPSHOT INTO THE RESEARCH

Social Integration Among Adults Aging With Spinal Cord Injury: The Role of Features in the Built and Natural Environment. *Journal of Aging and Environment*. (2023). DOI: 10.1080/26892618.2023.2203178 PMID: PMC10961974 NIHMSID: NIHMS1917077. Nasya Tan et al.



Goal of the Study

To examine the role the community environment plays in helping or preventing social integration for adults aging with SCI.

Findings

Almost 80% of participants took part in informal social activities, like getting together with friends or relatives, more than once per week. Participating in formal social activities (e.g., attending religious services or other organized groups) was less common, but more than 50% of participants still participated in these activities at least once per month.

- A greater time since the spinal cord injury was associated with less frequent participation in formal social activities.
- Compared to younger adults with SCI, older adults with SCI reported more barriers in visiting cultural and entertainment sites in their community.
- Individuals with higher incomes and education were more likely to participate in formal social activities.
- Those living alone participated in formal activities more frequently than those living with others.

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