

Driving After Sustaining a Spinal Cord Injury

Dec 30, 2011 by John Demas

Although many **spinal cord injury patients** cannot drive after their accidents, others can still pursue this activity following extensive rehabilitation therapy. Once fine motor coordination and strength return to an injured person's hands and arms, it may be safe to drive again. However, some spinal cord injury (SCI) patients with other chronic physical (or cognitive) problems may never be able to drive again due to all of the special risks involved.

Doctor's Approval Needed, Along with Demonstration of Basic Skills

After SCI patients obtain their doctors' approval to begin driving, they must then have appropriate driver trainers evaluate them to determine if there are any vehicles that can meet their individual needs. Like other drivers, SCI patients must be able to demonstrate: (1) adequate muscle strength, (2) good vision, (3) range of motion and flexibility, (4) proper reaction time and (5) good basic coordination. SCI patients must also prove that their cognitive skills are fully intact, making it possible for them to make good, sound judgments and decisions while driving.

Available Auto and Van Modifications for SCI Patients

Although it may always be safer to drive using two hands and arms, SCI patients who can only manipulate a joystick driving system with one hand may still be able to: (1) steer their vehicles, (2) make them accelerate and (3) apply the brakes as needed. Furthermore, there are other vehicles that can be modified so that the steering wheel system requires little strength and is completely located within the disabled driver's full range of motion. There are even vans and autos with steering and braking systems that require far less strength to operate than vehicles used by the non-disabled.

Information Available from The Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists

The Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists' Web site provides helpful information for disabled individuals seeking specialized driver training and vehicular modifications. This group states that a committee of the National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association (NMEDA) recently conducted a survey of 52 Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies to determine what types of special services are currently being provided to disabled drivers with special needs.

Unfortunately, only slightly more than half of these 52 agencies have filled out and returned their surveys. Nevertheless, the returned surveys indicate that the disabled are frequently asked to provide the following types of information so the agencies can determine if they'll help them:

- A list of current income from all sources. Also, a list of all of their financial resources that might help them pay for their specialized driver training and vehicular modifications;
- Their age and educational status;
- The percent of their driving time that's dedicated to holding down a job;
- Competitive bids for their driver training and car modification fees;
- The type(s) of insurance they currently have.

Hopefully, this brief article will help SCI patients and their families begin discussing whether driving will be a wise goal for the injured party to pursue in the future.