

# Web Survey Highlights

## Working after Spinal Cord Injury



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As you would expect, a spinal cord injury (SCI) has a traumatic impact on not only the body but on the execution of formerly innate daily function and activities and therefore dramatically life-altering. After an acute care, rehabilitation can consume months, and sometimes years. Daily routine can be extensive, time consuming and may require outside assistance. For many, the process is exhausting and understandably frustrating. Depression often accompanies this process of rehabilitation and loss of former self and lifestyle. Nevertheless, often there comes a point where acceptance of the situation sets in and the individual decides, "Enough. It's time to get on with my life." Sometimes this realization occurs prior to community involvement however often it occurs by just being involved and exposed to peers and support. Many individuals with SCI want to participate in all facets of our society: work, love, laughter, challenges, joys, and failures.



NRH Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) recently conducted an on-line survey about employment for those who had suffered spinal cord injuries, and they got some fascinating results. First of all, more than 60% of respondents stated that they were working and nearly half of them full-time. This is a remarkable figure, especially considering that only 75% of respondents were working before their injury. Our respondents' rate of employment compares to national averages for people without disabilities. In the United States, 64% of working-age persons without disabilities are employed as compared to 35% of those who have disabilities.

But keep in mind that most survey respondents have lived with their injury for more than 5 years, and they have had lots of time to adapt to their new situation. They are also, obviously, online. Computer skills open up opportunities to work from home where people with SCI have more flexibility to tailor their

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Funded by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), U.S. Department of Education. Grant #H133B090002. The opinions expressed on these pages are those of the authors, and no official endorsement by the Department of Education or any other funding source should be inferred.



work schedule and environments to support the needs of managing their SCI. Further, the online environment facilitates continuing education for all persons but may be particularly appealing after SCI. Persons with SCI actually have a higher level of education than does the general population and education enhances employment prospects. The Internet also expands opportunities for networking and developing supportive relationships both personally and professionally.

If you've had a spinal cord injury more recently and feel working would be impossible, don't give up. Even a high level of SCI doesn't exclude you from employment opportunities. Many people need special accommodations, particularly modifications of their workspace and flexible work schedules. Notably, 90% of survey respondents reported having no problems receiving the accommodations that they asked their employer for. This may be a reason for their

high rate of success in employment compared to persons with SCI generally. We plan to conduct another survey in the near future to see how important the Internet and flexible work schedules and locations have been to the high rate of employment our survey respondents enjoy.

Nevertheless, 20% of those surveyed reported that they were unemployed and actively looking for work, a rate more than double the national average. This is likely due in part to our nation's economic troubles, but it is also due to accessibility problems and the severity of SCI injury.

Another obstacle to employment is the fear that by working, individuals would lose their disability benefits. Given the high costs associated with SCI, not having these resources would be devastating. If you are in this situation, be sure to talk to a social worker or financial advisor. There could be solutions for you to explore.

Staying active and keeping busy helps individuals cope with SCI by improving their physical health and their sense of well-being. Social isolation can be an even greater obstacle than your injury, so don't try to struggle through this challenge alone—tap into the resources of RRTC and connect with your local SCI community. Together we can achieve great things.

