

Secondary health conditions in individuals aging with SCI: Terminology, concepts and analytic approaches

ABSTRACT

Study design: Literature review

Objectives: Utilizing individuals with spinal cord injury (SCI) as a representative population for physical disability, this paper: (1) reviews the history of the concept of secondary conditions as it applies to the health of individuals aging with long-term disabilities; (2) proposes a definition of secondary health conditions (SHCs) and a conceptual model for understanding the factors that are related to SHCs as individuals age with a disability; and (3) discusses the implications of the model for the assessment of SHCs and for developing interventions that minimize their frequency, severity and negative effects on the quality of life of individuals aging with SCI and other disabilities.

Methods: Key findings from research articles, reviews and book chapters addressing the concept of SHCs in individuals with SCI and other disabilities were summarized to inform the development of a conceptual approach for measuring SCI-related SHCs.

Conclusions: Terms used to describe health conditions secondary to SCI and other physical disabilities are used inconsistently throughout the literature. This inconsistency represents a barrier to improvement, measurement and for the development of effective interventions to reduce or prevent these health conditions and mitigate their effects on participation and quality of life. A working definition of the term SHCs is proposed for use in research with individuals aging with SCI, with the goal of facilitating stronger evidence and increased knowledge upon which policy and practice can improve the health and well-being of individuals aging with a disability.