

# Respiratory Health & Spinal Cord Injury



Today is Michelle's birthday! She tries to blow out her candles, but cannot get enough air.

So she asks her friend for help.

You know what? Blow out these candles with me.

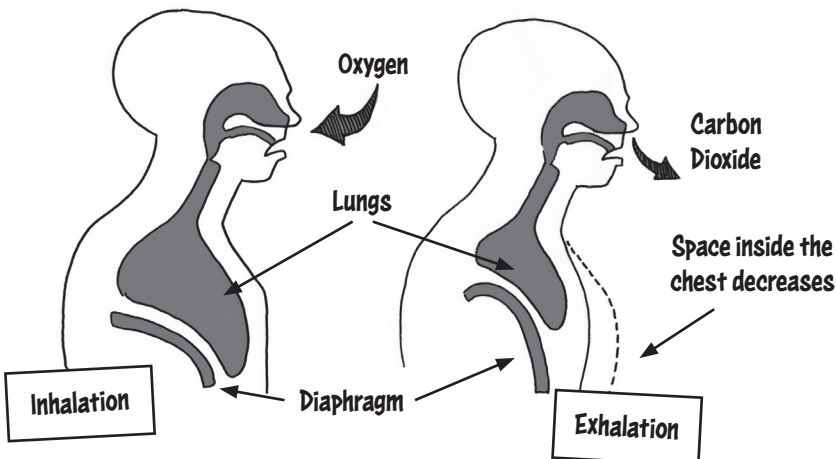


It looks like you're wondering why that was hard for me?



Seeing her friend's curiosity, Michelle explains that a spinal cord injury (SCI) can lead to respiratory muscle weakness and paralysis. This can make it hard to breathe.

Michelle explains that respiratory muscle weakness and paralysis means the muscles that allow you to inhale oxygen into your lungs and exhale carbon dioxide no longer work or are too weak to work well, causing shortness of breath.



Does that impact your health?



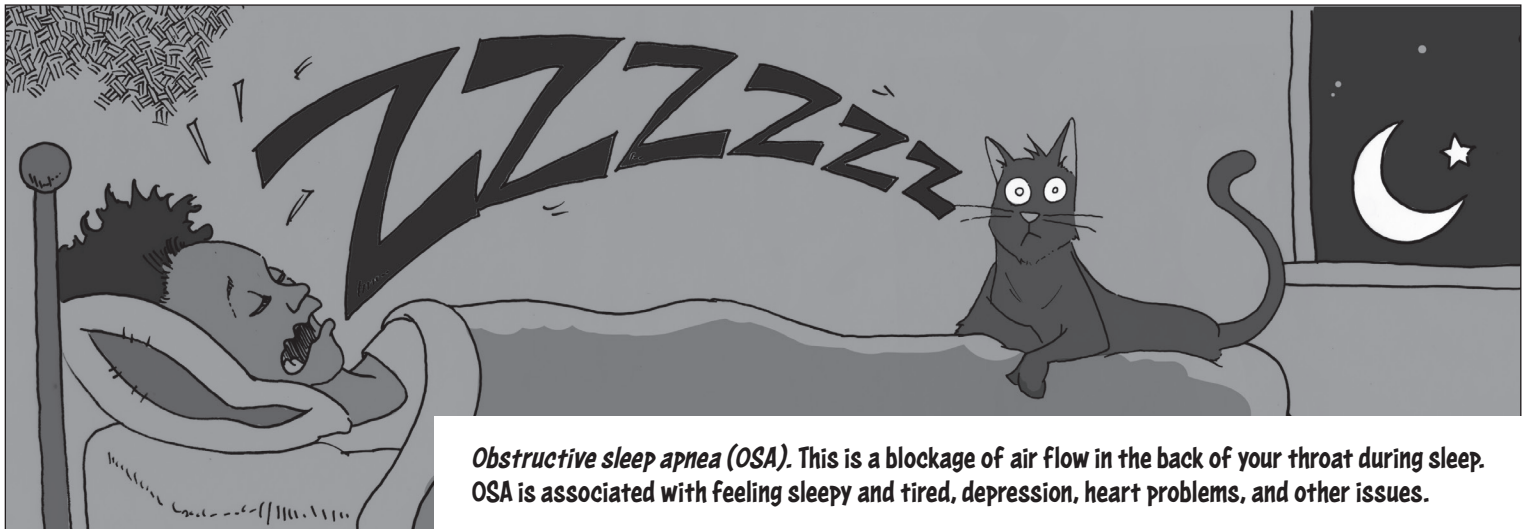
Michelle tells her friend that people with SCI who have respiratory problems may develop other health problems. These may include:



**Bronchitis.** This is an infection in the tubes that lead to the lungs.



**Pneumonia.** This is an infection of the air sacs in the lungs.



**Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA).** This is a blockage of air flow in the back of your throat during sleep. OSA is associated with feeling sleepy and tired, depression, heart problems, and other issues.

Michelle then explains to her friend that during her rehab stay, she learned ways to actively help her lungs be as healthy as possible, including:



**Do not smoke or vape.** Avoid secondhand smoke. Cigarette smoke or inhaling smoke or vapors from other sources can harm your health in many ways.



**Avoid the buildup of mucus in the lungs.** A cough assist machine can help keep your lungs clear if your respiratory muscles are too weak to cough. An attendant or family member can also be taught to help you cough.



**Stay hydrated!**

Drink plenty of water, especially if you have an infection, unless your healthcare provider has told you something different. Be active and keep a healthy weight. Being overweight may lead to lung problems.



Get a flu shot every year. There are also two different types of pneumonia shots that you should discuss with your health care provider. Stay away from people who may have the flu or a cold.



Michelle says that even when she tries her best to prevent respiratory problems, they can still happen. That's why she ALWAYS contacts her healthcare provider if she has signs of a respiratory infection or sleep apnea. She also sees her provider once a year for a check-up.



...Now, let's have some cake!

**Source:** The Content of this infocomic has been adapted from the factsheet *Respiratory Health and Spinal Cord Injury*, which was developed by Eric Garshick, MD, MOH, Phil Klebine, MA, Daniel J. Gottlieb, MD, MPH, and Anthony Chiodo, MD, in collaboration with the Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center. It was illustrated by Grant Corley. Our health information content is based on research evidence whenever available and represents the consensus of expert opinion of the SCI Model System directors.

**Disclaimer:** This information is not meant to replace the advice of a medical professional. You should consult your health care provider about specific medical concerns or treatment. The contents of this infocomic were developed under grants from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant numbers 90DP0082 and 90DPKT0009). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this infocomic do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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