

# Experimental Treatments for Spinal Cord Injury: What you Should Know

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## Introduction

Experiencing a spinal cord injury (SCI) is extremely distressing, both physically and psychologically, and throws people into a complex, unfamiliar world of medical procedures, terminology, and decision making. You may have already had surgery to stabilize the spinal column and reduce the possibility of further damage. You are understandably distressed about the functions you may have lost below the level of spinal injury. You wish to recover any lost abilities as soon as possible. You, your family, or friends may have searched the Internet for treatments and cures.

After an SCI, patients are often told that there are no approved drug or cell transplant treatments that will repair the damage and restore voluntary movement. This is still true, regardless of what you may hear or read about a research “breakthrough.” This advice is given with the best intentions, in the hope that people will focus on their rehabilitation and recovery programs, rather than looking for a miracle cure. Nevertheless, great advances have been made in the science of spinal cord repair. Treatments that could one day improve the function of people living with SCI are being tested. However, there are also people who might offer you an unproven treatment, claiming they can restore function if you have money to pay!

This article is intended to address some of the questions you may have about various therapies or treatments after SCI, that are experimental, meaning their benefits and risks are still unproven but they are being studied by medical experts and researchers. The therapies discussed in this article are not to be confused with the approved medications that you might receive to manage infections, spasticity, or other health issues. The information provided focuses mostly on testing of new drugs, cellular therapies, tissue or cells used as grafts, antibodies or other biological substances, and newly developed technologies and devices. It offers advice to help you make an informed decision about participating in a clinical trial. It will also explain why you should avoid paying for unproven treatments and placing yourself at risk for an unlikely benefit. You are encouraged to discuss these issues with your healthcare team.

A group of leading scientists and clinicians contributed their time and expertise to create this article to help you understand how treatments are developed and tested and to help you make informed choices. It was first created in 2006, revised in 2012, and has now been updated as of 2021.

The first thing to understand is how experimental treatments become proven therapies that you can be confident might help you.

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