

DRIVING AFTER A SPINAL CORD INJURY

After a spinal cord injury has occurred, a person is no longer able to drive an automobile in the normal manner. However, there are several types of adaptive equipment and vehicle modifications that can allow an individual with a spinal cord injury to drive. Depending on the level of injury and functional ability, either a sedan or van may be an appropriate vehicle choice. The following are considerations for selecting a vehicle:

Driving a sedan: When considering the use of a sedan, the individual must be able to do the following:

- Lock and Unlock the door
- Open and close the door
- Transfer to and from the wheelchair
- Store and retrieve the wheelchair (either independently or with a wheelchair loading device)

Since characteristics and dimensions of vehicles vary, it is important that the individual performs these functions in the vehicle being considered prior to purchase. A driver rehabilitation specialist can provide recommendations for sedan selection.

Driving a van: If an individual is unable to drive a sedan, there are several options available for driving a van. Specialized modifications can allow a person to transfer to the driver seat or to drive from the wheelchair.

There are several levels of driving control technology to compensate for the loss of strength and/or range of motion. Some of these include:

- Reduced effort steering systems to compensate for reduced strength
- Servo brake and accelerator control to compensate for reduced range of motion and strength.
- Joystick driving systems, allowing one hand operation of brake, accelerator and steering.

Adaptive equipment and vehicle modifications for wheelchair access are available for some full-size and mini vans; however, all vans are not suitable for modifications. A driver rehabilitation specialist can assist in making the correct van choice. He/she can provide a comprehensive evaluation to determine a person's ability to drive. The Assessment should include: Vision perception, functional ability, reaction time, and a behind-the-wheel evaluation.