Environmental control systems (ECS) are useful for people with tetraplegia because they provide independent access to everyday electronic devices such as televisions and telephones using either a switch or a joystick. This Irish study investigated what people with tetraplegia thought about using ECS.

In the first part of the study 15 people who were users and non-users of ECS met to discuss their thoughts about ECS in four focus groups. Thematic analysis revealed that having an environmental control system means increased autonomy for users as it changes the dynamics of relationships others and it also provides an opportunity for them to spend some time alone.

In the second part of the study six people used an ECS starter pack in their own homes for eight weeks. The simple ECS starter pack developed for use in the study included a video and instruction booklet. After using the pack for 8 weeks, each person explained what the experience was like through an interview with the researcher.

Analysis of these interviews revealed that using an ECS involved an initial stage of getting used to using it. This was sometimes a hassle because it led to frustration and having to change some habits. Those who overcame this hassle became engaged with using the ECS and described the experience as surprising, enjoyable, and even humorous.

Using an ECS provided an opportunity to take back a little of what was lost through reclaiming a little ‘doing’. Participants reported being able to enjoy their own company, do some everyday things and feel less physically dependent. They also felt enabled as they felt safe alone, felt less needy and experienced pleasure in doing things again.

Environmental control systems-taking back a little of what you have lost

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Above: A participant using an environmental control system

Take home message: ECS can provide improved autonomy through feeling enabled, and through increasing activity. However getting used to them requires effort and support to overcome frustration and to change existing habits.