

Spinal Cord Compression Early Warning Signs

Oncology & Clinical Haematology

Introduction

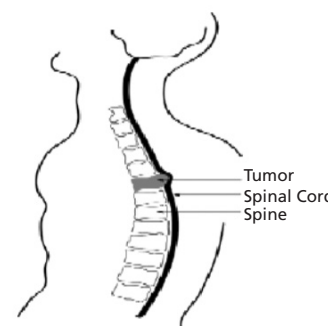
If you have been diagnosed with cancer you need to know about spinal cord compression and its warning signs.

If you can recognise these early warning signs and get treated quickly, permanent damage may be avoided. This leaflet explains what to look out for and what you should do if you have any warning signs.

What is spinal cord compression?

The spinal cord is a bundle of nerves that runs from the brain down the back. It is surrounded by the bones of the spine. The spinal cord provides nerves to the body including the bladder, arms and legs. If you have a tumour in the bones of the spine (vertebrae) or in the tissues around the spinal cord, it can cause pressure (compression) on the spinal cord. This can cause pain, altered sensation and weakness.

Spinal cord compression is not common but happens to 1 in 20 people affected by cancer. The risk of cord compression is relatively small even if you have a secondary cancer in the spine.



What are the warning signs?

It depends on which part of the spine is affected but the warning signs could be any one or more of the following:

- **Pain** in your spine that is severe, distressing or different from your usual pain (especially if not responding to painkillers)
 - Severe pain in your spine which changes when you lie down or stand up, lift or strain, wakes you up at night, or stops you getting to sleep
 - Pain which starts in the spine and goes around the chest or belly
 - Pain down your leg or arm
- **Tingling or numbness** ('pins and needles') in any part of your spine, arms or legs
- **Weakness** in your arms and/or legs
 - Difficulty walking because of stiff, heavy or wobbly legs
 - Sudden or slower gradual changes in your ability to walk or legs giving way

The prevention of infection is a major priority in all healthcare and everyone has a part to play.

- Please decontaminate your hands frequently for 20 seconds using soap and water or alcohol gel if available
- If you have symptoms of diarrhoea and/or vomiting, cough or other respiratory symptoms, a temperature or any loss of taste or smell please do not visit the hospital or any other care facility and seek advice from 111
- Keep the environment clean and tidy
- Let's work together to keep infections out of our hospitals and care homes.

- **Bladder or bowel problems** - loss of control (incontinence) or not being able to empty your bladder.

What should I do if I develop any warning signs?

Get advice immediately:

Contact the 24 hour helpline 07920587036

Explain that you may have spinal cord compression and describe your symptoms.

Do not delay. Ring today even if it is at a weekend or a holiday period.

What happens next?

A doctor needs to examine you. If the doctor suspects that you may have spinal cord compression he will advise you to stay flat in bed and a Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) of your spine will be arranged urgently.

The doctor should consider prescribing steroids (Dexamethasone). Steroids reduce pressure and swelling around nerve tissue. If you are diabetic, or have had problems with steroids in the past, you should tell your doctor.

Radiotherapy, surgery and chemotherapy are all options for treatment. Your doctors and health care team will discuss the best treatment for you with specialist advisors. This treatment option depends on the type of cancer, which part of the spine is affected and your general health.

If you have spinal cord compression you will probably be admitted to your local hospital. You may need to be transferred to New Cross Hospital in Wolverhampton for radiotherapy or Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital, Oswestry if you need surgery.

You will have to stay flat in bed until the doctors are satisfied that it is safe to start walking again. You will get help with this from the physiotherapist. If your neck or top of the (cervical) spine is affected, you will also need to wear a collar to prevent damage to the spinal cord.

Spinal cord compression, if untreated or if there is a delay in treatment, can lead to permanent damage and even paralysis. Early diagnosis and treatment gives the best chance of preventing paralysis.

Remember to get help if you develop any warning signs. Seek immediate help if you have unexplained tingling, numbness or weakness in your arms and legs.

This document is based on material from NICE, the former GMCN and various sources within the NHS.

Further information for patients

<https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/impacts-of-cancer/malignant-spinal-cord-compression>

English

If you need information in another way like easy read or a different language please let us know.

If you need an interpreter or assistance please let us know.

Lithuanian

Jeigu norėtumėte, kad informacija jums būtų pateikta kitu būdu, pavyzdžiui, supaprastinta forma ar kita kalba, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.

Jeigu jums reikia vertėjo ar kitos pagalbos, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.

Polish

Jeżeli chcieliby Państwo otrzymać te informacje w innej postaci, na przykład w wersji łatwej do czytania lub w innym języku, prosimy powiedzieć nam o tym.

Prosimy poinformować nas również, jeżeli potrzebowaliby Państwo usługi tłumaczenia ustnego lub innej pomocy.

Punjabi

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਰੂਪ ਵਿਚ, ਜਿਵੇਂ ਪੜ੍ਹਨ ਵਿਚ ਆਸਾਨ ਰੂਪ ਜਾਂ ਕਿਸੇ ਦੂਜੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ, ਚਾਹੀਦੀ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਦੁਆਸ਼ੀਏ ਦੀ ਜਾਂ ਸਹਾਇਤਾ ਦੀ ਲੋੜ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।

Romanian

Dacă aveți nevoie de informații în alt format, ca de exemplu caractere ușor de citit sau altă limbă, vă rugăm să ne informați.

Dacă aveți nevoie de un interpret sau de asistență, vă rugăm să ne informați.

Traditional Chinese

如果您需要以其他方式了解信息，如易读或其他语种，请告诉我们。

如果您需要口译人员或帮助，请告诉我们。