



***PATIENT
INFORMATION***

Spinal Cord Compression: What you need to know

What is spinal cord compression?

People with cancer are at risk of it spreading to other parts of the body, including the spine, so you need to know about spinal cord compression and the warning signs.

Spinal Cord compression is rare but if it does occur it can be very serious.

The spinal cord is the group of nerves that runs down the back inside the bones of the spine (vertebrae). It provides nerves to all parts of the body including the bladder, arms and legs. If you have a tumour in the bones of the spine or in the tissue surrounding the spinal cord, it can cause pressure (compression) on the spinal cord. This can cause pain, altered sensation and weakness.

If you can recognise these early warning signs and get treatment quickly, permanent damage may be avoided.

What are the warning signs?

- Back pain in one area of your spine that is severe, distressing or different from any pre-existing back pain (especially if it affects the upper spine or neck)
- Severe increasing pain in the spine that:
 - Changes when you lie down
 - Changes when lifting or straining
- Pain which starts in the spine and spreads around the chest or abdomen
- Pain or tingling down the leg
- A new feeling of clumsiness or weakness of the arms or legs or difficulty in walking
- Difficulty in controlling your bladder or bowels.

What should I do if I develop these warning signs?

- Get advice immediately by contacting your hospital Cancer Nurse Specialist, your GP, Community Palliative Care Nurse or Macmillan Support Radiographer.
- Describe your symptoms and explain that you are worried that you may have spinal cord compression and that you need to be seen urgently.
- **Out of hours contact your GP or Devon Doctors**

What happens next?

- A doctor needs to examine you.
- If he or she suspects that you have cord compression, the doctor will urgently arrange for you to have a scan on your spine. This is usually an MRI scan but you may have a different scan if this is not suitable for you.
- A doctor will prescribe steroids (Dexamethasone) for you before or after the scan. 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 doctors.
- Radiotherapy is the usual treatment for cord compression by tumours. But some people may need surgery or chemotherapy.

Your oncology team will discuss the best treatment for you with the specialist surgeons. The best treatment option depends on the type of cancer, which part of the spine is affected and your general health. In any case, treatment should start as soon as possible after the scan.

- If you have cord compression you will be admitted to your local hospital. You will have to stay flat in bed until treatment is started. 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 there is a delay in treatment, can lead to permanent damage and even paralysis.

Early diagnosis and treatment gives the best chance of successful treatment.

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.