



Royal Berkshire
NHS Foundation Trust

Metastatic spinal cord compression

Recognising the signs
and symptoms

Before you read the leaflet it is important that you understand that spinal cord compression (when a tumour puts pressure on your spinal cord) only occurs in a small number of people. However, being aware and reporting the early warning signs is extremely important in order to prevent the problem worsening.

Why have I been given this leaflet?

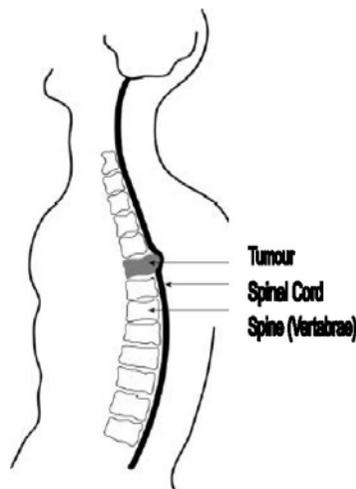
You have been given this leaflet to read because you have cancer which can sometimes spread to the bones of the spine (vertebrae). The most common cancers that spread to the spine are breast, lung, kidney or prostate and people who have lymphoma or myeloma. The vertebrae protect the spinal cord, which is a large bundle of nerves which transfers messages from the brain. As it passes through each vertebra it sends off smaller nerves called nerve roots. These supply the body, arms and legs with sensation and controls the movement of muscles, including the bowel and bladder.

Spinal cord compression is pressure on the spinal cord.

This may happen because:

- The vertebrae are affected by cancer or;
- A secondary tumour is damaging the vertebrae or;
- The cancer has spread to the tissues around the vertebrae.

Cancer that has spread to other areas in the body are called 'metastases' or 'secondaries'. When metastases affect the spine, they can swell and squash the spinal cord, or sometimes they can weaken the bone.



What symptoms will I have?

The spinal cord acts as a 'switchboard' for messages from the brain, telling your arms and legs to move and sending messages back to the brain. When the spinal cord is squashed the messages are prevented from travelling along it. As a result, you may experience certain symptoms.

In most people, symptoms occur in the lower half of the body, but some people can be affected in the upper body including the neck and arms. Symptoms can vary, but may not happen in any particular order. These include:

- New pain or worsening of an existing pain in your neck or back. This can sometimes feel like a band of pain spreading round the sides of the chest. Sometimes, the pain is worse when you cough or sneeze or go to the toilet and strain.
- Weakness in your feet / legs or difficulty in walking. Sometimes you may get a 'heavy feeling' in your legs and they may 'give way'.
- Numbness and /or pins and needles in hands/arms or feet/legs.
- Difficulty in emptying your bladder or bowels, or loss of control in passing urine or opening your bowels.
- Numbness / loss of sensation in the perineum (area between front and back passage in females and scrotum and back passage in males). This may lead to you not being aware when you are passing urine or opening your bowels.

What should I do if I get any these symptoms?

It is important that you are aware of the early signs and symptoms and report them to your GP, hospital consultant, specialist nurse (key worker) or radiographer immediately. If you cannot make contact with them, go to the nearest hospital Emergency Department. Show this leaflet to your GP and other medical staff to help them decide on the right tests and treatment for you.

Remember, the faster spinal cord compression is diagnosed the sooner treatment can begin to prevent permanent damage which can lead to serious disability.

What happens next?

Your doctor will need to be sure whether these symptoms are due to spinal cord compression, therefore you will need some tests carrying out. These are likely to include:

- Questions about your signs and symptoms.
- MRI scan (Magnetic resonance Imaging) to show which part of the spine and nerves are affected.

An examination of the range of movement and reflexes in your arms and legs and a simple sensitivity test to measure skin sensation over your abdomen, arms and legs.

What is treatment is available?

If you are diagnosed with spinal cord compression your consultant or clinical nurse specialist / radiographer will explain what treatment you are likely to be offered and you will be given an information leaflet to read.

Please remember that metastatic spinal cord compression is a rare complication of cancer. However, being aware of the early signs and symptoms and reporting them straight away to your GP, nurse specialist (key worker), or hospital doctor will enable early diagnosis and treatment.

Your Clinical Nurse Specialist	
Your Consultant	
Your GP	

For more information about the Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

Based on a leaflet by Jane Gray, Oncology CNS at Great Western Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

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