

MALIGNANT SPINAL CORD COMPRESSION

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CANCER SUPPORT

Information for patients

You have been given this leaflet because you have cancer and are at risk of developing malignant spinal cord compression (MSCC). The leaflet explains what MSCC is and what symptoms to look out for. It also tells you what to do if you develop symptoms.

MSCC is a rare condition but it is potentially serious. It is important that you know the symptoms so you can get medical advice as soon as possible. The earlier that treatment starts the more likely it is to be effective.

Any type of cancer can spread to the bones of the spine, but MSCC is more common in people with breast, lung or prostate cancers, lymphoma, or myeloma.

This leaflet is not intended to scare you, but to help you recognise the symptoms and know what to do if you develop them.

What is MSCC?

The spinal cord is a bundle of nerves that run from the brain down the back. It plays a vital role in many body functions including movement, bowel and bladder function and the sensations of touch, pain and temperature. The spinal cord is surrounded by the bones of the spine, which protect it.

MSCC can happen when cancer grows in the bones of the spine or in the tissues around the spinal cord. The cancer can cause pressure (compression) on the spinal cord.

What should I look out for?

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

Unexplained new back or neck pain

- The pain may be mild to start with but becomes more severe.
- It may feel like a 'band' around your chest or abdomen.
- The pain may spread down your leg or arm, or into your lower back and buttocks.
- Movement may make the pain worse.
- The pain may get worse when you strain – for example, if you lift something heavy, cough or sneeze.
- The pain may keep you awake at night.

Numbness or pins and needles in a part of your body, such as your toes, fingers or over the buttocks.

Feeling unsteady on your feet – having difficulty walking, leg weakness or your legs giving way.

Problems passing urine

- You may have difficulty controlling your bladder (incontinence).
- You may only pass small amounts of urine or none at all.
- You may be constipated or have problems controlling your bowels.

These symptoms can also be caused by a number of other conditions.

What should I do if I develop symptoms?

If you develop any of these symptoms, get medical advice **immediately**.

Contact someone today, even if it is the weekend or a holiday.

You should contact the hospital team where you usually go for cancer treatment and follow-up appointments.

Ask them to write down their phone number:



If you are unable to get in touch with anyone, go to the nearest A&E department or contact your GP.

When you speak to a health professional:

- Describe your symptoms.
- Tell them you have cancer and are worried you have spinal cord compression.
- Tell them that you need to be seen immediately.
- Show them this information leaflet or your alert card.

Do not wait for further symptoms to develop. The sooner MSCC is diagnosed, the sooner treatment can begin. If left untreated, MSCC will cause permanent problems.

What happens next?

The doctor needs to examine you. If they suspect MSCC, they may tell you to lie flat. The doctor will also arrange an urgent scan of your spine. This is usually an MRI scan, but may be a CT scan if you can't have an MRI.

The doctor will prescribe some steroids. These help reduce swelling and pressure on the nerves. Tell the doctor if you are diabetic or have had problems with steroids before.

If you have MSCC, the doctor will talk to you about the best treatment options. This will depend on the type of cancer you have, which part of the spine is affected and your general health. For the best result, treatment should start as soon as possible.

We're here

At Macmillan, we know how a cancer diagnosis can affect everything and we're here to support you through. From help with money worries and advice about work, to someone who'll listen if you just want to talk, we'll be there. We'll help you make the choices you need to take back control, so you can start to feel like yourself again.

No one should face cancer alone. For support, information or if you just want to chat, call us free on 0808 808 00 00 (Monday to Friday, 9am–8pm) or visit macmillan.org.uk

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