

Metastatic spinal cord compression

Information for patients

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

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

What is MSCC?

Some cancers can spread to the bones of the spine or to the tissues that surround the spinal cord. This is called secondary cancer or metastatic cancer.

The most common symptom of cancer in the spine is back pain. Tell your doctors straight away if you have back pain that:

- is severe
- is getting worse
- gets worse with movement or with straining – for example, when coughing or emptying your bowels (pooing)
- disturbs your sleep
- causes tenderness
- causes muscle pain or cramps when walking or exercising.

MSCC can happen when cancer grows and presses on the spinal cord. This is called compression. It stops the nerves from working properly.

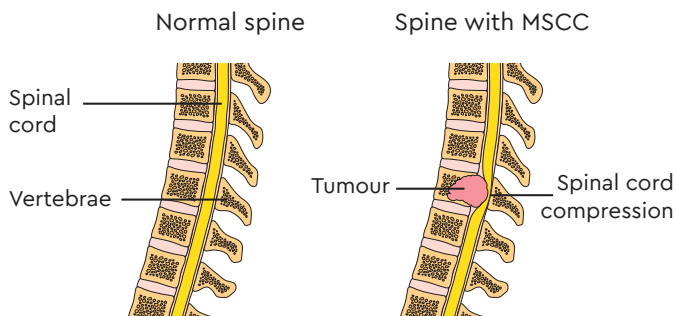
Any type of cancer can spread to the bones of the spine and affect the spinal cord. But MSCC is more common in people with breast cancer, lung cancer, prostate cancer or myeloma.

The spinal cord

The spinal cord is a bundle of nerves that runs from the brain down the back. It connects the brain to the rest of the body. It is important for many of the body's functions. These include:

- movement
- bowel and bladder function
- the sensations of touch, pain and temperature.

The spinal cord is surrounded and protected by the bones of the spine (vertebrae).



What should I be aware of?

Symptoms of MSCC depend on which part of the spine is affected. The warning signs can be 1 or more of the following.

Bowel problems

These include:

- having problems controlling your bowels (incontinence)
- being newly constipated, or constipation getting worse.

Problems passing urine (peeing)

These include:

- having difficulty controlling your bladder (incontinence)
- only passing small amounts of urine or none at all.

Feeling unsteady on your feet

These include:

- having difficulty walking
- leg weakness
- your legs giving way.

Feeling that your arms and hands do not work properly

These include:

- weakness in your arms and hands
- not being able to grip things properly.

Numbness or pins and needles

You may feel numbness or pins and needles – anywhere in your body. This could be a symptom if it is new or quickly getting worse.

Back or neck pain

This means pain that is new and may:

- feel like a band around your chest or tummy (abdomen)
- spread down a leg or arm
- spread into your lower back and buttocks.

These symptoms can also be caused by other conditions. But you should always get your symptoms checked, even if you have had previous treatment for MSCC.

What should I do if I have these symptoms?

If you develop any symptoms of MSCC, you should get medical advice immediately. Even if it is the weekend or a holiday, contact the hospital team who you usually go to for cancer treatment and follow-up appointments.

Make sure you have their contact details and you know who to phone at evenings and weekends. You can ask them to write down their phone number here:



If you are unable to get in touch with anyone, go to the nearest Emergency Department (A&E) straight away.

When you speak to a health professional:

- describe your symptoms
- tell them you have cancer and are worried you may have spinal cord compression
- show them this leaflet or your MSCC alert card.

Spinal cord compression is an emergency that needs treatment as soon as possible.

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

What happens next?

A member of your healthcare team will examine you. If they think you might have MSCC, they may tell you to lie flat on your back and not move your spine. They may also give you steroids and arrange an urgent scan of your spine. If you have MSCC, the doctor will talk with you about the best treatment for you.

Treatment should start as soon as possible. This will help prevent further damage to the spinal cord and help with symptoms, including pain.

Treatment is often with radiotherapy. Some people may have surgery or chemotherapy. Your doctor will discuss the best treatment for your situation.

There is more information about the treatment options for MSCC on our website. Visit macmillan.org.uk/MSCC

Thanks to the Clatterbridge Cancer Centre Metastatic Spinal Cord Compression Service for its expertise in updating this information.

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