

MALIGNANT SPINAL CORD COMPRESSION

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 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 runs from the brain down the back. It plays an important role in many body functions. These include:

- movement
- bowel and bladder function
- 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.

About 3 to 5 in 100 people with cancer (3 to 5%) develop MSCC.

What should I look out for?

Depending on which part of the spine is affected, the warning signs could be any one or more of the following:

A new, unexplained back or neck pain, which may:

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

Numbness or pins and needles that is new or quickly getting worse. This may be:

- in your toes
- in your fingers
- over the buttocks.

Feeling unsteady on your feet, including:

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

Problems passing urine, including:

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

Bowel problems, including:

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

These symptoms can also be caused by a number of other conditions, but you should always get them checked.

What should I do if symptoms develop?

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

Contact someone straight away, 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 Emergency Department (A&E) or contact your GP.

When you speak to a health professional:

- describe your symptoms
- tell them you have cancer and are worried you may have spinal cord compression
- tell them that you need to be seen straight away
- 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 a magnetic resonance imaging scan (MRI scan), but may be a computerised tomography scan (CT scan) if you cannot have an MRI.

The doctor will usually 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 with you about the best treatment options for you. This will depend on:

- the type of cancer you have
- which part of the spine is affected
- your general health.

For the best result, treatment should start as soon as possible.

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

We're here for you

We're here to help you find your best way through from the moment of diagnosis, so you're able to live life as fully as you can.

For information, support or just someone to talk to, call **0808 808 00 00** or visit macmillan.org.uk



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