



Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Spinal cord compression: How to recognise the signs and symptoms

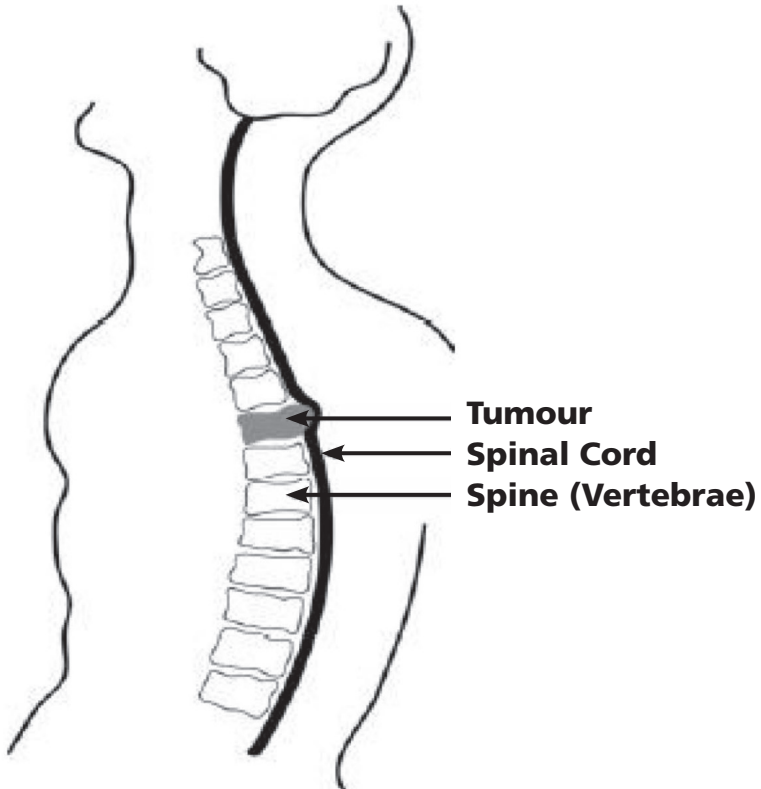


Before you read this leaflet it is important you understand that spinal cord compression only occurs in a small number of people. However, being aware and reporting the early warning signs is extremely important to prevent the problem from getting worse.

Why have I been given this leaflet?

You have been given this leaflet to read because you have a 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, prostate, lymphoma and myeloma. When cancers spread to the spine like this, they are called metastases.

The vertebrae protect the spinal cord, which is a large bundle of nerves that transfer messages from the brain to the rest of the body.



When metastases affect the spine, they can swell and squash the spinal cord.

Metastatic spinal cord compression is pressure on the spinal cord.

Symptoms to look out for

The spinal cord acts as a messenger for 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 around the sides of the chest. Sometimes the pain is worse when you cough, sneeze or go to the toilet.
- Weakness in your feet / legs or difficulty 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 emptying your bladder or bowels, or loss of control when passing urine or opening your bowels. 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 of the symptoms listed above?

You should report them to the **Oxford Triage Assessment Team**
Tel: **01865 572 192**

If you cannot contact the team, go to the Accident & Emergency Department of your nearest hospital.

Please show this leaflet to medical staff to help them decide on the right tests and treatment for you.

Remember, the sooner that spinal cord compression is diagnosed, the sooner that treatment can begin. Early treatment can prevent permanent damage which can lead to serious disability such as paralysis and loss of bowel and bladder function.

What happens next?

If you have any of the symptoms above, your doctor will need to examine you and carry out some tests to make sure your symptoms are due to spinal cord compression. This process is likely to include:

- questions about your 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.

Treatment for spinal cord compression

If you are diagnosed with spinal cord compression, your consultant or clinical nurse specialist will explain what treatment you are likely to be offered. You will also 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 will enable early diagnosis and treatment.

The earlier it is diagnosed, the better the chances of treatment being effective.

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

Author: Adapted from 'Spinal Cord Compression: How to recognise the signs and symptoms' (Jane Gray, Great Western Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust)

Dr Andrew Eichholz

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Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

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