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The Royal Liverpool
and Broadgreen
University Hospitals
NHS Trust

Patient information

Signs and Symptoms of Metastatic Spinal Cord Compression (MSCC)

Merseyside and Cheshire Cancer Network

Introduction

The following leaflet is designed to give you information about the signs and symptoms that may suggest the possibility of secondary cancer in the spine. This can be a very worrying prospect but we hope that in giving you this information now, you will be able to recognize any signs and act upon them quickly, especially as early detection and action can help.

When cancer develops within the spine, it can be a cancer that has spread from somewhere else in the body (secondary cancer) or may be the first sign of any cancer.

There are two different ways cancer can affect the spine

- Cancer of the spine affecting the spinal bones (vertebra) or surrounding tissue but **not** affecting the spinal cord or nerves.
- Cancer affecting the spinal bones and/or the surrounding tissues which can the cause pressure on the spinal cord and/or nerves known as metastatic spinal cord compression (MSCC)

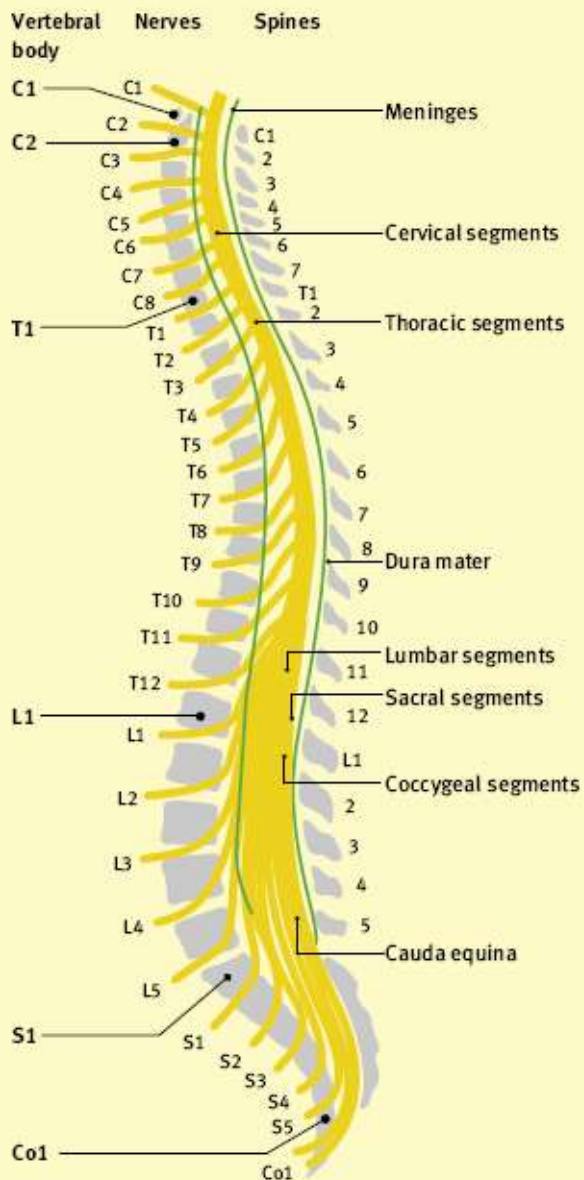
What does all this mean?

In order to understand how cancer can affect people it helps if you know how the spine is constructed.

The spine is composed of two sections; the spinal column and the spinal cord.

The spinal column is a tall tower of bones that start at the base of your skull and travel down your back to your coccyx (tail bone)

Spinal cord in vertebral canal showing relationships of spinal cord segments, spinal nerves and dural sac to vertebral bodies and spines



The bones (vertebrae) are all stacked on top of each other with discs in between each bone to act as shock absorbers stopping the bones from rubbing on each other.

The delicate spinal cord and nerves run through a channel in the middle of the spinal column and are protected by spinal column. The spinal cord sends out nerves, which act in the same way as a telephone exchange passing information from our brain to our body and back again. These messages give us the movement of our bodies and also the sensations we feel, for example: pressure, touch and hot or cold on our skin.

What are the signs of cancer of the spine?

If the cancer is located within the vertebra of the spine (not affecting the spinal cord or nerves) this can give pain around the site of the cancer. **If you experience any new back pain or tenderness, you should discuss this with your doctor.**

What is metastatic spinal cord compression? (MSCC)

The space within the spinal column is quite small and when the cancer develops within the bones this can then expand causing pressure on the spinal cord or the nerves that travel out of it. The pressure stops the nerves from sending out the normal messages and because of this the body cannot act how it should. The signals are damaged, and the messages for movement and sensation are affected.

Are some cancers more likely to lead to MSCC?

Yes. The chances of developing MSCC are increased if you've had breast, lung or prostate cancer.

How can I look out for symptoms of MSCC?

If you remember that the spinal cord is responsible for a lot of the functions in the body then the symptoms will depend on which are of the spine the cancer is located, but the most common symptoms are:

- New or more severe back pain
- Problems passing urine, this can mean:
 - not being able to empty your bladder and pass urine.
 - needing to pass urine far more often than you normally would.
 - needing to empty your bladder.
- Numbness or altered sensations around your genital area.
- Difficulty with your bowel function; this can mean you have poor control over your bowel movements, constipation and numbness around your bottom.
- Weakness in one or both of your legs or arms/hands.
- Unusual numbness, tingling or pins and needles in any part of the body.

What should I do if I think I have got symptoms of MSCC?

You should contact your family doctor (GP), NHS Direct or your local Accident and Emergency Department. It is important to act quickly, so that you can receive the most appropriate care.

How can I explain my fears of developing MSCC to anyone including health staff?

This leaflet and an Alert card for MSCC are available for you. MSCC is rare and symptoms can be mistaken for other health problems like a 'trapped nerve', normal back pain, 'you're going to the toilet more often because you are getting older, etc.

If I develop MSCC, is treatment possible?

For most people, yes.

There are two main options:

- For about 15-20% of people who develop MSCC, surgery may be possible. This will be carefully considered by your doctors after scans have been done, and discussed with you. Surgery is usually done to prevent any further weakness, or symptoms, and to improve any pain.
- Whether you have had surgery or not, radiotherapy may be beneficial, to reduce the pressure on the spine caused by the cancer.

I have been given the 'all clear' should I worry about developing MSCC?

The chances of developing MSCC are low but experience of people who have developed MSCC is that they would have wanted to know what **might** happen, so they could look out for any symptoms developing.

It is important to recognise, any symptoms early as intervention early can often reduce any problems with movement, sensation and pain that the pressure from the cancer can cause.

Feedback

Your feedback is important to us and helps us influence care in the future

Following your discharge from hospital or attendance at your Outpatient appointment you will receive a text asking if you would recommend our service to others. Please take the time to text back, you will not be charged for the text and can opt out at any point. Your co-operation is greatly appreciated

Additional Information for Relatives and Carers

The information above will be of interest and importance to you. In addition you play a key role in supporting your loved one with their previous health problems and perhaps in looking out for warning signs and symptoms that may indicate MSCC.

If you are uncertain about anything in this leaflet or you feel anxious about its contents, ask your Consultant, GP or Specialist Nurse.

You may also need further information and support for yourself and you should ask for this from your GP or some of the contacts mentioned below.

- **Cancer Research UK**
www.cancerhelp.org.uk/default.asp
Information Nurses
Telephone 0207 061 8355
- **Macmillan Cancer Support**
www.macmillan.org.uk
Tel 0207 8407 840 or call free on 0808 808 0000
(Monday to Friday 9 am – 8 pm)
- **NHS 111 Service**
Telephone: 111

Further Information

The Spinal Team

The consultants are:

Mr Marcus DeMatas

Mr Sathya Thambiraj

Mr Prokopis Annis

Mr Radu Popa

Mr George Ampat

Spinal Specialist Nurse

Mark McGowan

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All Trust approved information is available on request in alternative formats, including other languages, easy read, large print, audio, Braille, moon and electronically.

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