



When Cancer Spreads to Bone Spinal Cord Compression

What You Need to Know

Cancer can either stay in one part of the body, or it can spread to many different areas, such as bone. It can sometimes end up in the bones of the spine. A tumour growing in the bones of the spine can sometimes start to press on the spinal cord—the nerve structure in the back. This is called **spinal cord compression**.

When spinal cord compression happens, a person may have a number of symptoms. The possible symptoms are listed below.

What are the symptoms?

Pain in your back

This pain can be anywhere in the back, from your neck down to your tailbone. The pain may get worse when you move or when you lie flat. A lot of people who have cancer have pain, but you want to be especially careful if you have back pain that is new or persistent, back pain that gets a lot more severe, or pain that wraps around the body like a belt.

Numbness/tingling sensation

A common symptom of spinal cord compression is pins and needles in your legs or arms and/or a loss of feeling in your legs or arms. It is also possible to lose feeling in your groin area or trunk.

Muscle weakness

Muscle weakness may be hard to notice. A simple way to find out if you have muscle weakness is to ask yourself some easy questions.

- Do my legs or arms feel heavy, like they are weighed down with something?
- Can I walk across a room or up a flight of stairs as well as I could last week?
- Am I tripping or dragging my feet?
- Can I grasp things with a firm grip and lift them up?

Bladder or bowel problems

Some people with spinal cord compression may find it difficult to pass urine and can go long periods of time without urinating. When they do urinate, it is sometimes difficult to start the flow of urine. People who have spinal cord compression may not have a feeling of bladder or bowel fullness, or they may lose control of their bladder or bowel.



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Problems Walking

People who have severe or prolonged spinal cord compression may have symptoms—including paralysis—that may be permanent. This is the main reason why it is so important to notice the signs and symptoms of spinal cord compression and to seek medical treatment right away.

It is very important that you do not ignore the symptoms of spinal cord compression. Early detection and treatment are extremely important. The earlier you treat this condition, the more likely it is that the symptoms of spinal cord compression will be avoided or relieved.

How can spinal cord compression be treated?

There are many different ways to treat spinal cord compression, and early treatment is very important. The most common treatment is a combination of steroids and radiation therapy. The goal of the treatment is to shrink the tumour (or to stop it from getting bigger) and relieve the pressure that it is causing on the spinal cord. Sometimes surgery or chemotherapy are options, but only under certain specific circumstances.

If you have any questions about spinal cord compression, or think you may have the symptoms of cord compression, you should contact your doctor immediately or go into the Emergency Room.

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