

Cauda equina syndrome

Patient Information Leaflet

Introduction

This leaflet is about a condition called cauda equina syndrome (CES). It gives information about how the condition can affect you, the warning signs to look for that may mean you have the condition, and what to do if you get these warning signs.

What is cauda equina syndrome? (CES)

It is a **rare** but serious condition that affects a group of nerves called cauda equina.

The cauda equina nerves are at the lowest point of your back (see figure 1). They perform the following functions:

- Allow control of the legs
- Control the bladder and bowel
- Supply sensation to the skin around the bottom, back passage, genitals and inner thigh

Cauda equina syndrome occurs when this group of nerves are compressed. The most common cause of compression is when a disc in the lower back bulges into the same space as the nerves; usually known as a disc prolapse.

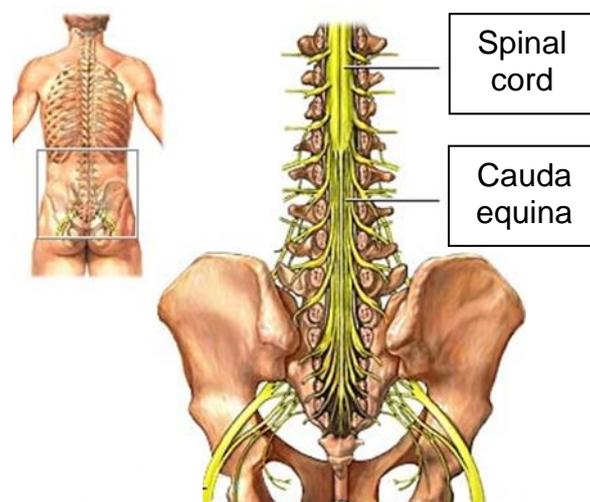


Figure 1 shows the spinal cord and cauda equina nerves

Common back pain and CES

Many people have a combination of back pain, leg pain, leg numbness and leg weakness. These symptoms can be very distressing for you but they do not necessarily need emergency medical attention. It is best to get advice from a physiotherapist or your GP about treatment and pain relief.

However, CES can lead to permanent damage and/or disability so you will need to be seen by an emergency team as soon as possible. Any delay in diagnosis can impact recovery and could lead to permanent damage such as incontinence or paralysis of the legs.

What are the CES warning signs?

- Loss of feeling/pins and needles between your inner thighs or genitals
- Numbness in or around your back passage or buttocks
- Altered feeling when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- Increasing difficulty when you try to urinate
- Increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control your flow of urine
- Loss of sensation when you pass urine
- Leaking of urine or recent use of pads
- Not knowing when your bladder is either empty or full
- Inability to stop a bowel motion or leaking
- Loss of sensation when you pass a bowel motion
- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Loss of sensation in genitals during sexual intercourse

Any combination or number of these warning signs could be symptoms of cauda equina syndrome. Get emergency medical help immediately.

Go to your local emergency department (A&E) and take this leaflet with you to help explain your symptoms.

If you have any questions, or if there is anything you do not understand about this leaflet, please contact the department or healthcare professional who gave you this leaflet.

If you would like this information in an alternative language or format, for example in large print or easy read, please call us on 0800 073 0510 or email PALs@dgh.nhs.uk or write to Patient Advice and Liaison Service.