

# Metastatic spinal cord compression (MSCC)



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This fact sheet is for men with advanced (metastatic) prostate cancer that has spread to the bones. Your partner, family or friends might also find it helpful.

We talk about a condition called metastatic spinal cord compression (MSCC). This happens when cancer cells grow in or near to your spine and press on your spinal cord. You might also hear MSCC called malignant spinal cord compression, or spinal cord compression (SCC).

MSCC doesn't happen to all men whose cancer has spread to the bones. It's not common, but it is important that you're aware of the risk, what symptoms to look out for and how to get help. For more information on MSCC, speak to your doctor or nurse. You can also speak to our Specialist Nurses, in confidence on 0800 074 8383.

### Don't wait

It is very important to seek medical advice immediately if you think you might have MSCC because the sooner you have treatment, the lower the risk of long-term problems.

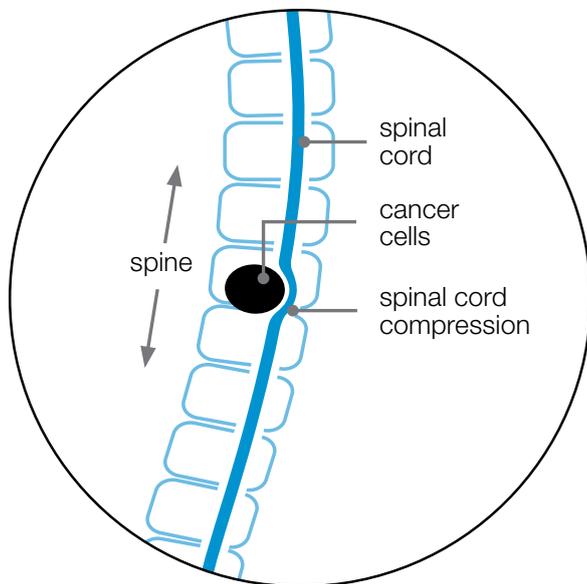
## What is metastatic spinal cord compression (MSCC)?

MSCC happens when cancer cells grow in or near to the spine and press on the spinal cord.

The spinal cord is a long thin bundle of nerves and other cells. It runs from your brain down through your spine. The nerves carry messages between your brain and all parts of the body. These messages allow you to move and to feel things like heat, cold, touch or pain. They also help control body temperature and how your internal organs work.

Cancer cells pressing on the spinal cord can cause problems with how these messages are carried. This can cause a range of symptoms (see page 2) which can get worse if left untreated. For example, you may be less able to walk and move around.

At its worst, MSCC can cause paralysis which could mean you can't walk or can't use your limbs normally. Remember, there are treatments available and getting treatment straight away can lower the risk of this happening, or of it being permanent.



## What is my risk of developing MSCC?

MSCC is not common, but you need to be aware of it if you have prostate cancer that has spread to your bones or has a high chance of spreading to your bones. Your risk of MSCC is highest if your prostate cancer has already spread to your spine.

Speak to your doctor or nurse for more information about your risk of MSCC.

## What symptoms do I need to watch out for?

MSCC can cause any of the following symptoms.

- Pain or soreness in your lower, middle or upper back or neck that is severe or different from usual pain. The pain might get worse when you cough, sneeze, lift or strain, or go to the toilet. It might get worse when you are lying down. It may wake you at night or stop you from sleeping.
- A narrow band of pain around your tummy or chest that can move towards your lower back, buttocks or legs.
- Pain that moves down your arms or legs.
- Weakness in your arms or legs, or difficulty standing or walking. You might feel unsteady on your feet or feel as if your legs are giving way. Some people say they feel clumsy.
- Numbness or tingling (pins and needles) in your legs, arms, fingers, toes, buttocks, stomach area or chest, that doesn't go away.
- Problems controlling your bladder or bowel. You might not be able to empty your bladder or bowel, or you might have no control over emptying them.

These symptoms can also be caused by other conditions, but it is still important to get medical advice in case you do have MSCC.

## What should I do if I get symptoms?

If you get any of the symptoms listed on page 2, you should get medical advice straight away. Don't wait to see if your symptoms get better and don't worry if it's an inconvenient time, such as the evening or weekend.

Ask your doctor or nurse to fill in the box below with details of who you should contact in your local area.

If your doctor suspects that you may have MSCC, you will need to have a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan to look at your spine. You may also have a computerised tomography (CT) scan.

### Who to contact if I get symptoms of MSCC:

During the day (from \_\_\_ am to \_\_\_ pm):

At night (from \_\_\_ pm to \_\_\_ am):

At the weekend (if different to above):

If you don't have details of who to contact, or you can't reach them, go to your nearest accident and emergency (A&E) department. You should tell the A&E staff that you have prostate cancer and symptoms of spinal cord compression. Not everyone will be familiar with MSCC, so it might be a good idea to take this fact sheet or other information about MSCC with you.

## How is MSCC treated and managed?

While you are waiting for a diagnosis, there are a number of things that can be done to make you more comfortable and to help protect your spinal cord from further harm.

- **Bed rest**

You might be asked to lie flat on your back. This helps keep your spine still and reduce the risk of further damage to your spinal cord. Your doctor or nurse will monitor your condition and let you know when it's safe for you to gradually sit up.

- **Pain relief**

There are a number of pain-relieving drugs that can treat the pain caused by MSCC and by the cancer in other parts of your body. You can read more about these in our Tool Kit fact sheet, **Managing pain in advanced prostate cancer**.



- **A steroid called dexamethasone**

This works quickly to reduce swelling and relieve pressure on the spinal cord. You'll be given a daily dose as a tablet or a drip through a vein in your arm. The dose will be gradually reduced and stopped if your symptoms have improved, and after you've started other treatment. You might also be given tablets to help prevent the steroids irritating your stomach.

If you are diagnosed with MSCC, you will start treatment within 24 hours. Your doctor will explain the different treatment options to help you decide what's right for you. They will take your preferences into account as far as possible. They will also support you and your family after treatment to help you recover from MSCC.

There are several treatments available – you may be offered a combination of these.

- **Radiotherapy**

The aim of this treatment is to shrink the cancer cells that are pressing on your spinal cord. It can also help to relieve the pain. Radiation is directed at the affected area from outside the

body (known as external beam radiotherapy).

The number of times you need treatment varies, but is likely to be every day for up to a week. Read more in our Tool Kit fact sheet,



**Radiotherapy for advanced prostate cancer.**

- **Surgery**

Surgery is sometimes used. Your doctor will discuss this with you if it's suitable for you. It usually involves reducing the pressure on your spinal cord and stabilising your spine. Surgery is sometimes done at a specialist spinal unit. You might be given radiotherapy once you've recovered from surgery, to shrink any areas of cancer that might be left in the spine.

- **A support brace**

This fits around your back or neck and helps keep your spine still. It can also help with pain. This is only used if other treatments are not suitable for you, or if your spine still needs support after other treatments.

## What happens after treatment?

MSCC can affect men in different ways. Getting treatment early can reduce the risk of long-term problems, but for some men it can take weeks or months to recover. Sometimes the effects can last longer or are permanent. Your doctor or nurse at the hospital will make sure you get the support you need.

If MSCC means that you're less able to walk and move around, a physiotherapist can show you exercises that can help. An occupational therapist (OT) can make sure you have the right equipment in your house so that you're comfortable and can move about more easily. Your doctor will also look at the treatments you are having for your prostate cancer.

You can read about treatments that may be used to help control the growth of prostate cancer in our Tool Kit fact sheet, **Second-line hormone therapy and further treatment options**.



There are also treatments that might help with symptoms. Read about this in our booklet, **Advanced prostate cancer: Managing symptoms and getting support**.



## Dealing with prostate cancer

If you are dealing with prostate cancer you might feel scared, worried, stressed, helpless or even angry.

At times, lots of men with prostate cancer get these kinds of thoughts and feelings. But there's no 'right' way that you're supposed to feel and everyone reacts in their own way.

There are things you can do to help yourself and there are people who can help. Families can also find this a difficult time and they may need support too. This section might also be helpful for them.

### How can I help myself?

Everyone has their own way of dealing with prostate cancer, but you may find some of the following suggestions helpful.

- Find out about your treatment, so you know what your options are and what to expect.
- Find out about any side effects of your treatment, so you know what to expect, and how you can try to manage them.
- Think about what you eat and drink. Some men find they manage better by aiming for a healthy, balanced diet. Read more about healthy eating in our Tool Kit fact sheet, **Diet, physical activity and prostate cancer**.
- If you have advanced prostate cancer you might feel tired and find it harder to keep active. Adapt your normal hobbies and activities or find new ways of enjoying yourself. Don't push yourself, and rest if you feel you need to.
- Share what you're thinking – find someone you can talk to. It could be someone close, or someone trained to listen, like a counsellor or your medical team.
- Take time out to look after yourself. When you feel up to it, learn some techniques to manage stress and to relax – like listening to music or breathing exercises.



- Set yourself goals and things to look forward to. These can just be small things.



- Find more ideas in our booklet, **Living with and after prostate cancer: A guide to physical, emotional and practical issues.**

- Get more ideas about how to look after yourself from Macmillan Cancer Support, Maggie's Centres and Penny Brohn Cancer Care, as well as local cancer support centres.

- There's more about finding support, including the practical side of things, in our booklet,



- **Advanced prostate cancer: Managing symptoms and getting support.**

## Who can help?

### Your medical team

It could be useful to speak to your nurse, doctor, GP or someone else in your medical team. They can help you understand your diagnosis, treatment and side effects, listen to your concerns, and put you in touch with other people who can help.

### Our Specialist Nurses

Our Specialist Nurses can answer your questions, help explain your diagnosis and go through your treatment options with you. They've got time to listen to any concerns you or those close to you have about living with prostate cancer. Everything is confidential.

To get in touch:

- call 0800 074 8383
- email from our website at **prostatecanceruk.org/get-support**
- text NURSE to 70004.

### Trained counsellors

Counsellors are trained to listen and can help you to find your own ways to deal with things. Many hospitals have counsellors or psychologists who specialise in helping people with cancer – ask your doctor or nurse at the hospital if this is available.

Your GP may also be able to refer you to a counsellor, or you can see a private counsellor. To find out more contact the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy.

### Our one-to-one support service

Our one-to-one support service is a chance to speak to someone who's been there and understands what you're going through. You could discuss treatment options, dealing with side effects, or telling people about your cancer – whatever's important to you.

Family members can also speak to partners of men with prostate cancer.

### Our online community

Our online community is a place to talk about whatever's on your mind – your questions, your ups and your downs. Anyone can ask a question or share an experience.

### Local support groups

At local support groups men get together to share their experiences of living with prostate cancer – you can ask questions, offload worries and know that someone understands what you're going through. Some groups have been set up by local health professionals, others by men themselves. Many also welcome partners, friends and relatives.

### Our fatigue support service

Our fatigue support service is a 10-week telephone service delivered by our Specialist Nurses. It can help if you have problems with extreme tiredness (fatigue), which is a common symptom of prostate cancer. Fatigue can also be a side effect of some treatments for prostate cancer. The fatigue support service can help you make positive changes to your behaviour and lifestyle, which can improve your fatigue over time.

To find out more about all of the above, visit **prostatecanceruk.org/get-support** or call our Specialist Nurses on 0800 074 8383.



## More information

### British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP)

[www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk](http://www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk)

Telephone: 01455 883300

Information about counselling and details of therapists in your area.

### Cancer Research UK

[www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org)

Telephone: 0808 800 4040

Patient information from Cancer Research UK. Includes information about metastatic spinal cord compression.

### Help the Hospices

[www.helpthehospices.org.uk](http://www.helpthehospices.org.uk)

Telephone: 020 7520 8200

Information about hospice care, including a database of hospice and palliative care providers.

### Macmillan Cancer Support

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

Telephone: 0808 808 00 00

Practical, financial and emotional support for people with cancer, their family and friends.

### Maggie's Centres

[www.maggiescentres.org](http://www.maggiescentres.org)

Telephone: 0300 123 1801

A network of drop-in centres for cancer information and support. Includes an online support group.

### Marie Curie Cancer Care

[www.mariecurie.org.uk](http://www.mariecurie.org.uk)

Telephone: 0800 716 146

Runs hospices throughout the UK and a nursing service for people in their own home free of charge.

### Penny Brohn UK

[www.pennybrohn.org.uk](http://www.pennybrohn.org.uk)

Telephone: 0303 3000 118

Runs courses and offers physical, emotional and spiritual support for people with cancer and those close to them.

## About us

Prostate Cancer UK has a simple ambition: to stop men dying from prostate cancer – by driving improvements in prevention, diagnosis, treatment and support. .

This fact sheet is part of the Tool Kit. You can order more Tool Kit fact sheets, including an



**A to Z of medical words**, which explains some of the words and phrases used in this fact sheet.

Download and order our fact sheets and booklets from our website at **[prostatecanceruk.org/publications](http://prostatecanceruk.org/publications)** or call us on **0800 074 8383**.

At Prostate Cancer UK, we take great care to provide up-to-date, unbiased and accurate facts about prostate cancer. We hope these will add to the medical advice you have had and help you to make decisions. Our services are not intended to replace advice from your doctor.

References to sources of information used in the production of this fact sheet are available at **[prostatecanceruk.org](http://prostatecanceruk.org)**

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- Our Specialist Nurses
- Our Volunteers.

### Tell us what you think

If you have any comments about our publications, you can email:

**[literature@prostatecanceruk.org](mailto:literature@prostatecanceruk.org)**



## Speak to our Specialist Nurses

**0800 074 8383\***

**prostatecanceruk.org**

### Donate today – help others like you

Did you find this information useful? Would you like to help others in your situation access the facts they need? Every year, 40,000 men face a prostate cancer diagnosis. Thanks to our generous supporters, we offer information free to all who need it. If you would like to help us continue this service, please consider making a donation. Your gift could fund the following services:

- £10 could buy a Tool Kit – a set of fact sheets, tailored to the needs of each man with vital information on diagnosis, treatment and lifestyle.
- £25 could give a man diagnosed with a prostate problem unlimited time to talk over treatment options with one of our Specialist Nurses.

To make a donation of any amount, please call us on **0800 082 1616**, visit **prostatecanceruk.org/donate** or text **PROSTATE** to **70004**<sup>†</sup>.

There are many other ways to support us. For more details please visit **prostatecanceruk.org/get-involved**

<sup>†</sup>You can donate up to £10 via SMS and we will receive 100% of your donation. Texts are charged at your standard rate. For full terms and conditions and more information, please visit [prostatecanceruk.org/terms](http://prostatecanceruk.org/terms)



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**t** Follow us on Twitter: **@ProstateUK**

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**Call our Specialist Nurses from Monday to Friday 9am - 6pm, Wednesday 10am - 8pm**

\* Calls are recorded for training purposes only.  
Confidentiality is maintained between callers and Prostate Cancer UK.

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