Metastatic spinal cord compression (MSCC)

In this fact sheet:
- What is metastatic spinal cord compression (MSCC)?
- What is my risk of developing MSCC?
- What symptoms do I need to watch out for?
- What should I do if I develop symptoms?
- How is MSCC treated and managed?
- What happens after treatment?
- Where can I get support?
- More information
- About us

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

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

MSCC does not happen to all men whose cancer has spread to the bones. It's not common, but it is important that you are aware of the risk and what symptoms to look out for. For more information on MSCC, speak to your doctor or nurse or call our Specialist Nurses on our confidential helpline.

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 the brain down through the spine. The nerves carry messages between the brain and all parts of the body. These messages allow you to move and to feel things like pain, touch, heat or cold. 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 opposite) which can get worse if left untreated. For example, it can make you 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 which has spread to the bones. The risk is highest if it has already spread to the spine.

Men with advanced prostate cancer are usually offered hormone therapy, which can keep the cancer under control for many months or years. It is unlikely that you will get MSCC during this time. However, over time, your cancer might start to grow again and MSCC may be more likely. But you might still respond to other types of hormone therapy or other treatments.

Read more about this in our Tool Kit fact sheet, [Second-line hormone therapy and further treatment options](#).

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 which 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 which 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 pins and needles in your legs, arms, fingers, toes, buttocks, stomach area or chest, that don’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 develop symptoms?

If you develop one or more 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.

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 the 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 which 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 medicine called dexamethasone**
  This is a steroid. You will be given it to reduce swelling which will relieve pressure on the spinal cord. You might take it as a tablet or be given it through a drip. Using a drip involves running a liquid containing the drug through a fine tube (cannula) into a vein in your arm. You might also be given medicine to help prevent irritation to your stomach, which can be a side effect of steroids.

If you are diagnosed with MSCC, you will start your main treatment soon – it could be within 24 hours, and won’t be longer than a week. Your doctor will assess you, together with any scans you’ve had. Then they 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.

Who to contact if I develop 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 and tell them that you have prostate cancer and symptoms of spinal cord compression. Staff in A&E may not always be familiar with MSCC, so it might be a good idea to take this fact sheet or other information about MSCC with you.

If your doctor suspects that you may have MSCC, you will need to have a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan to fully assess your spine.
There are several treatments available and you are likely to have 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 supporting your spine. Surgery is usually done at a specialist spinal unit. You might be given radiotherapy once you’ve recovered from surgery, to shrink any areas of cancer which 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. 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 which 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 which 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 which might help with symptoms. Read about this in our booklet, Advanced prostate cancer: Managing symptoms and getting support.

**Where can I get support?**

**Talking to professionals**

If you have been diagnosed with MSCC, there is support available. Your doctor or nurse should be able to answer any questions or concerns you might have, as well as provide support. You and those close to you can also speak to one of our Specialist Nurses by calling our confidential helpline. They can help you to understand your diagnosis, treatment options and the emotional effects of cancer.

You might also find it helpful to talk to a counsellor to help you to deal with your feelings. You may be able to get a referral to a counsellor through your GP or hospital doctor or nurse, or you can get a list of private counsellors from the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP) (see page 5 for contact details).

**Talking to someone who’s been there**

You and your family might find that talking to someone with similar experiences helps. Our support volunteers are all personally affected by prostate cancer, including advanced prostate cancer, and are trained to listen and offer support over the telephone. They include men with prostate cancer, their partners and other family members. Call our Specialist Nurses on our confidential helpline to arrange to speak to a volunteer.
If you have access to the internet, you and your family can join our online community on our website at prostatecanceruk.org. You can share your experiences with other men and their families. There are also prostate cancer support groups across the country, where you and your family can meet other people affected by prostate cancer. You can find details on our website or ask your nurse.

Support from hospices
You might be able to get support from your local hospice. Hospices don’t just provide care for people at the end of their life. They provide a range of services including treatment to manage symptoms, emotional and spiritual support, practical and financial advice and support for families. Some provide day centres with services such as complementary therapy. Your GP, doctor or nurse at the hospital, or district nurse can refer you to a hospice service. You can find out more about hospice services from Help the Hospices and Marie Curie Cancer Care (see opposite).

Read more about other sources of support in our booklet, Advanced prostate cancer: Managing symptoms and getting support.

More information
British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP)
www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk
Phone 01455 883300
Information about counselling and details of therapists in your area.

CancerHelp UK
www.cancerhelp.org.uk
Nurse helpline 0808 800 4040
Cancer Research UK’s patient information resource. Includes information about metastatic spinal cord compression.

Help the Hospices
www.helpthehospices.org.uk
Phone 020 7520 8200
Information about hospice care, including a database of hospice and palliative care providers.

Macmillan Cancer Support
www.macmillan.org.uk
Helpline 0808 808 00 00
Practical, financial and emotional support for people with cancer, their family and friends.

Marie Curie Cancer Care
www.mariecurie.org.uk
Phone 0800 716 146
Runs hospices throughout the UK and a nursing service for people in their own home free of charge.
About us
Prostate Cancer UK fights to help more men survive prostate cancer and enjoy a better life.

This fact sheet is part of the Tool Kit. You can order more Tool Kit fact sheets, including an A-Z of medical words, which explains some of the words and phrases used in this sheet.

Download and order our free publications from our website at prostatecanceruk.org 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

This publication was written and edited by:
Prostate Cancer UK’s Information Team

It was reviewed by:
- Lawrence Drudge-Coates, Urological Oncology Clinical Nurse Specialist and Honorary Lecturer, King’s College Hospital, London
- Jan Edwards, Acute Oncology/Neuro-oncology CNS, Ipswich Hospital NHS Trust
- Ann French, Urology Oncology Clinical Nurse Specialist, Southend University Hospital, Essex
- Peter Hoskin, Consultant Clinical Oncologist, Mount Vernon Cancer Centre, Middlesex
- Patricia McClurey, Prostate Cancer Specialist Nurse, James Cook University Hospital, Middlesbrough
- Christopher Scrase, Macmillan Consultant Oncologist and Honorary Senior Lecturer, Ipswich Hospital NHS Trust
- Bruce Turner, Uro-Oncology Nurse Practitioner, Homerton University Hospital Bart’s Health, London
- Prostate Cancer UK Volunteers
- The Prostate Cancer UK Specialist Nurses

Tell us what you think
If you have any comments about our publications, you can email: literature@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/donations or text PROSTATE to 70004*. There are many other ways to support us. For more details please visit prostatecanceruk.org/get-involved

**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

The Information Standard
Certified member

© Prostate Cancer UK February 2013
To be reviewed February 2015

Call our Specialist Nurses from Mon to Fri 9am - 6pm, Wed 10am - 8pm
*Calls are recorded for training purposes only.
Confidentiality is maintained between callers and Prostate Cancer UK.

Prostate Cancer UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1005541) and in Scotland (SC039332). Registered company number 2653887.