

Cauda Equina Syndrome

Information for Patients



Your clinician has given you this leaflet to advise you to look out for the symptoms of a rare but serious condition called cauda equina syndrome. Please take a few minutes to read through the information in this leaflet to make you aware of the problems that you may experience in the unlikely event of suffering cauda equina syndrome.

This leaflet contains information about the condition, instructions on what to look out for, and what to do if you are worried.

What is cauda equina syndrome?

Cauda equina syndrome is a collection of symptoms caused by something like a disc pressing on the nerves at the end of the spinal cord.

These nerves supply the legs, bladder and sexual organs and can be damaged permanently if compressed for too long.

This can lead to long-term problems with walking, going to the toilet or having sex. It is very rare, and research shows that it may affect only 1 to 2 people in every 100,000 people, but if you have a disc problem already you may be slightly more at risk.

What should I look out for?

- Loss of feeling / pins and needles around 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 (pee).
- Increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control the flow of urine.
- Loss of sensation when you pass urine.
- Leaking urine or recent need to use pads.
- Not knowing when your bladder is full or empty.
- Inability to stop a bowel movement (poo) or leaking.
- Loss of sensation when you pass a bowel motion.
- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate.
- Loss of sensation in the genitals during sexual intercourse.

Any combination of the above warning signs could be symptoms of cauda equina. Seek emergency medical help immediately if you develop any of these symptoms.

If you are concerned

Attend your local Emergency department immediately.

If cauda equina syndrome is not promptly treated, the nerves to your bladder and bowel can become permanently damaged.

You will need to be examined thoroughly. This will include testing the nerves in your legs and checking for feeling or numbness around your genitals and back passage.

It is not always easy to diagnose and you may need an MRI scan to make sure the nerves from your spinal cord are not being damaged.

If you have cauda equina syndrome you may need an emergency operation to take the pressure off your nerves.