

You and your back pain – watching out for Cauda Equina Syndrome

Who is this leaflet for?

This leaflet is for patients who have back problems. Back problems are very common, accounting for thousands of attendances every year to the Emergency Department.

Fortunately, the vast majority of people with a back problem will see their symptoms either improve or resolve entirely within a few weeks. You have been discharged from the Emergency Department today because we believe this applies to your condition. To help your recovery, you should take simple over the counter painkillers, and try to keep mobile and active.

A small number of people with back pain go on to get a further problem with the nerves within their spinal canal (at the bottom their spine). This condition is called Cauda Equina Syndrome. This leaflet gives you information on the warning signs and what to do if you get them.

What is this?

Cauda Equina Syndrome involves pressure on and disturbance of nerves at the bottom of the spine, which control bladder, bowel, sexual function and supply sensation to the skin around the bottom, back passage, genitals and inner thigh. These are important nerves, and any disturbance in their function is an emergency, which may require prompt surgery to protect you from permanent problems with bladder, bowel and sexual function. The most common cause of compression is when the disc in the lower back bulges (disc prolapse) and presses into the nerves.

For this reason it is important that you are aware of the symptoms of Cauda Equina Syndrome, so that you can look out for them at home.

What should I look out for?

New or worsening symptoms of:

- difficulty in passing urine, unable to control your bladder or unable to pass urine
- changes to your bowel habit, difficulty in passing faeces or incontinence
- altered feeling when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- numbness, pins and needles in your groin and genital area
- pain that travels down both legs at once
- weakness and / or numbness in both legs at once
- changes to your walking pattern
- change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate.

If any of these symptoms occur, please go to the Emergency Department immediately for assessment.

It may be the case that after your re-assessment the Emergency Department will be able to reassure you, and let you go home. You may however, require further investigation or assessments.

If you would like this leaflet in large print, braille, audio version or in another language, please contact the General Office on 01872 252690