

Metastatic spinal cord compression (MSCC)



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This fact sheet is for anyone 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 isn't common, but it is very 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 have any of the signs or symptoms of MSCC. The sooner you have treatment, the lower your risk of long-term problems.

Symbols

These symbols appear in this fact sheet:

-  Speak to our Specialist Nurses
-  Read our publications
-  Sections for you to fill in

What is metastatic spinal cord compression (MSCC)?

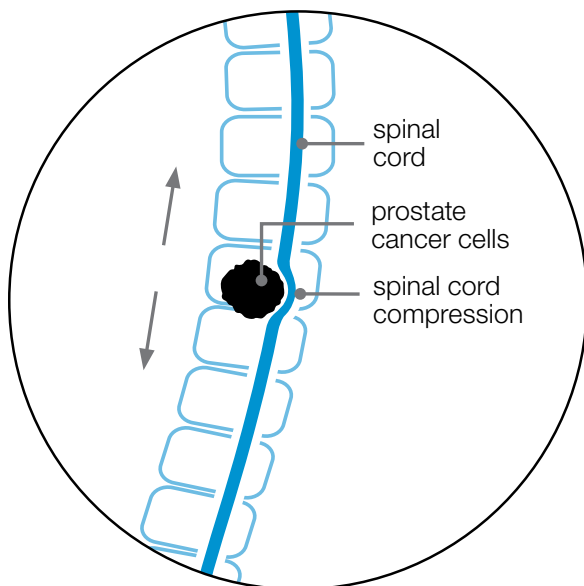
MSCC happens when cancer cells that have spread from the prostate grow in or near to the spine and press on the spinal cord.

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 that can get worse if left untreated. For example, you may be less able to walk and move around.

At its worst, MSCC can cause nerve damage and even paralysis, which could mean you can't walk or use your arms or legs 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 isn't common, but you need to be aware of the risk if your prostate cancer has spread to your bones or has a high risk of spreading to your bones. Your risk of MSCC is highest if the 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. The pain may be severe or get worse over time. It might get worse when you cough, sneeze, lift or strain, go to the toilet, or lie down. It may wake you at night or stop you from sleeping.
- A narrow band of pain around your chest or abdomen (stomach area) that can move towards your back, buttocks or legs.
- Pain that moves down your arms or legs.
- Weakness or loss of control of 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's still important to get medical advice straight away in case you do have MSCC.

What should I do if I get symptoms?

If you get any of the symptoms listed above, you should get medical advice straight away. Don't wait to see if your symptoms get better and don't worry if you think 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 thinks you may have MSCC, you will need to have a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan to look at your spine. If you can't have an MRI scan, you may have a computerised tomography (CT) scan instead.



Who to contact if I get symptoms of MSCC

Each hospital is different, but your doctor should give you the details of an emergency number to call. It might be helpful to note down contact details below.

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 your doctor or nurse isn't available, go to your nearest accident and emergency (A&E) department.

MSCC can be hard to diagnose, particularly if you have other health problems. It can sometimes be mistaken for general back pain, or bone pain caused by your cancer. So it's important to 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.

What will happen if my doctor thinks I have MSCC?

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.

- **Pain relief**

There are a number of ways to treat the pain caused by MSCC and by the cancer in other parts of your body, including pain-relieving drugs. Read more about these in our 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 tablets or a drip into a vein in your arm. The dose will be gradually reduced and stopped if your symptoms improve or you start another treatment. You might also be given tablets to help prevent the steroids irritating your stomach.

- **Bed rest**

You might be asked to lie flat on your back while you are waiting for a diagnosis. This helps keep your spine still and can reduce the risk of further damage to your spinal cord. Lying down will also stop you from falling over if you're finding it difficult to stand up or walk. You might be given support stockings to wear while you're lying in bed, to help prevent blood clots. Your doctor or nurse will monitor your condition and let you know when it's safe for you to gradually sit up.

How is MSCC treated?

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

There are two main treatments available – you may be offered one of these, or your doctor may suggest having both.

- **Radiotherapy**

This aims to shrink the cancer cells that are pressing on your spinal cord. It can also help to relieve the pain. High-energy X-ray beams are directed at the affected area from outside the body. This is known as external beam radiotherapy. You may have one or more treatment sessions – your medical team will discuss this with you. Read more in our fact sheet, **Radiotherapy for advanced prostate cancer**.



- **Surgery**

Surgery is sometimes used to treat MSCC. Your doctor will discuss this with you if it's suitable for you. It usually aims to reduce the pressure on your spinal cord and makes your spine more stable. 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.

If radiotherapy or surgery aren't suitable for you, or if your spine still needs support after treatment, you may be offered a support brace or collar. This fits around your back or neck and helps to support your spine. It can also help with pain. Speak to your doctor or nurse about whether a support brace or collar might be helpful for you.

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 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 to see if they need changing.

You can read about treatments that may be used to help control the growth of prostate cancer in our fact sheet, **Treatment options after your first hormone therapy**. There are also treatments that might help with symptoms.



Read about this in our booklet, **Advanced prostate cancer: Managing symptoms and getting support**.

What is my outlook?

Some men with MSCC want to know if it will affect how long they will live. This is sometimes called your outlook or prognosis.

If you have MSCC, this means your cancer is advanced and cannot be cured. MSCC itself doesn't affect how long you will live. But it could affect your ability to walk and move around if it isn't treated quickly. And it may be a sign that your cancer is becoming more advanced.

For more information about advanced prostate cancer and how to get support, read our booklet, **Advanced prostate cancer: Managing symptoms and getting support**.



No one can tell you exactly what your outlook will be as it will depend on many things such as your general health, where your cancer has spread to, how quickly it is spreading, and how well you respond to treatments. But if your doctor has explained that you are approaching the end of your life, you may want to read our information about dying from prostate cancer at prostatecanceruk.org/dying-from-prostate-cancer

Dealing with advanced prostate cancer

Some men say being diagnosed with prostate cancer changes the way they think and feel about life. 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 to feel and everyone reacts in their own way.



This section suggests some things you can do to help yourself and people who can help. Families can also find this a difficult time and they may need support and information too. They may want to read our booklet, **When you're close to someone with prostate cancer: A guide for partners and family**.

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.

Look into your treatment options

Find out about the different treatments you could have. Bring a list of questions to your doctor or nurse. And ask about any side effects so you know what to expect and how to manage them. This will help you decide what's right for you.

Talk to someone

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 doctor or nurse. People involved in your care should be able to help with any questions or concerns you might have.

Set yourself some goals

Set yourself goals and plan things to look forward to – even if they're just for the next few weeks or months.

Look after yourself

Take time out to look after yourself. When you feel up to it, learn some techniques to manage stress and to relax – like breathing exercises or listening to music. If you're having difficulty sleeping, talk to your doctor or nurse.

Eat a healthy, balanced diet

We don't know for sure whether any specific foods have an effect on prostate cancer. But eating well can help you stay a healthy weight, which may be important for men with prostate cancer. It's also good for your general health and can help you feel more in control. Certain changes to your diet may also help with some side effects of treatment. For more information, read our fact sheet, **Diet and physical activity for men with prostate cancer**.

Be as active as you can

Keeping active can improve your physical strength and fitness, and can lift your mood. We don't know for sure if physical activity can help slow the growth of prostate cancer. Physical activity can also help with some side effects of treatment. Even a small amount can help. Take things at your own pace. Read more in our fact sheet, **Diet and physical activity for men with prostate cancer**.

Get more tips on how to look after yourself from Macmillan Cancer Support, Maggie's, Penny Brohn UK, or your nearest cancer support centre. You can also find more ideas in our booklet, **Living with and after prostate cancer: A guide to physical, emotional and practical issues**.

Check out our online 'How to manage' guides

Our interactive guides have lots of practical tips to help you manage symptoms and side effects. We have guides on fatigue, sex and relationships, urinary problems and advanced prostate cancer. Visit prostatecanceruk.org/guides

Who else can help?

Your medical team

It may be useful to speak to your nurse, doctor, GP or someone else in your medical team. They can explain 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 help with any questions and explain your diagnosis and treatment options. They have time to listen, in confidence, to any concerns you or those close to you have.

Trained counsellors

Counsellors are trained to listen and can help you 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 if this is available. You can also refer yourself for counselling on the NHS website, or you could see a private counsellor. To find out more, visit www.nhs.uk/counselling or contact the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy.

Our one-to-one support service

This is a chance to speak to someone who's been there and understands what you're going through. They can share their experiences and listen to yours. You can discuss whatever's important to you. We'll try to match you to someone with similar experiences.

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.

Support groups

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

Our fatigue support

Fatigue is a common symptom of prostate cancer, and a side effect of some treatments.



Our Specialist Nurses can talk to you in depth about your experience of fatigue, and the impact it's having on your day-to-day life. They can also discuss ways to help you better manage your fatigue, such as behaviour and lifestyle changes.

Hospices

You may be able to get support from your local hospice or community palliative care team. Hospices don't just care for people at the end of their life – you may be able to use their services while still living at home. They provide a range of services, including pain management, emotional and spiritual support, practical and financial advice, and support for families. Your GP, doctor or nurse can refer you to a hospice service, and will work closely with these teams to support you.

Spiritual support

You might begin to think more about spiritual beliefs as a result of having advanced prostate cancer. You could get spiritual support from your friends, family, religious leader or faith group.

To find out more about any 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.bacp.co.uk

Telephone: 01455 883 300

Information about counselling and details of therapists in your area.

Cancer Research UK

www.cancerresearchuk.org

Telephone: 0808 800 4040

Information about prostate cancer, including information about metastatic spinal cord compression.

Hospice UK

www.hospiceuk.org

Telephone: 020 7520 8200

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

Macmillan Cancer Support

www.macmillan.org.uk

Telephone: 0808 808 0000

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

Maggie's

www.maggies.org

Telephone: 0300 123 1801

Drop-in centres for cancer information and support, and online support groups.

Marie Curie

www.mariecurie.org.uk

Telephone: 0800 090 2309

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

Penny Brohn UK

www.pennybrohn.org.uk

Telephone: 0303 3000 118

Courses and physical, emotional and spiritual support for people with cancer and their loved ones.

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.

Download and order our fact sheets and booklets from our website at 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, and other prostate problems. 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 has been reviewed for accuracy and updated by

- our Health Information team
- our Specialist Nurses.



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, over 47,000 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.

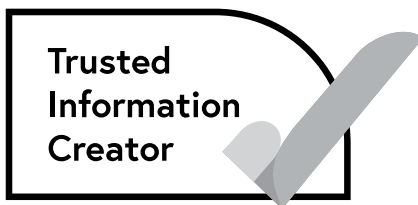
To make a donation of any amount, please call us on **0800 082 1616**, visit prostatecanceruk.org/donate or text **PROSTATE** to **70004**[†].

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



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Patient Information Forum

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Call our Specialist Nurses from Monday to Friday 9am - 5pm, Wednesday 10am - 5pm

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

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