



Patient Information Leaflet

Myelopathy

What is Myelopathy?

Myelopathy is the medical term for spinal cord compression in the neck (cervical) or chest region (thoracic) of the spine. Symptoms usually develop slowly over time, but rarely symptoms can progress suddenly. Symptoms of myelopathy can be very varied, and the extent of symptoms is not always related to the severity of spinal cord compression

There are two main causes of myelopathy:

1. A disc prolapse that compresses the spinal cord, this often results in symptoms that start quickly.
2. Age related changes, such as formation of osteophytes (bony spurs) that compress the spinal cord. This usually results in symptoms that develop over a longer time.

In rare cases this could be caused by other problems, including; tumours, infection, fracture or vascular conditions

Signs and symptoms of Myelopathy:

Not all patients describe pain. People who are affected usually report neurological symptoms in the arms and legs including:

- Clumsiness and loss of finger dexterity, including difficulty doing buttons up, writing, using cutlery
- Pins and needles and numbness affecting both arms or both legs
- Loss of co-ordination in your legs, such as tripping, falling or feeling unsteady
- Difficulty walking. Your legs may become weak or feel stiff
- Altered sensations such as trickling water
- Muscle Weakness

If a myelopathy is suspected then an MRI (magnetic resonance image) scan may be required to determine the extent and cause of any spinal cord compression.

In some cases of myelopathy, patients may deteriorate very quickly (over 4 weeks) and may require immediate medical attention. If this happens you may experience:

- Loss of feeling or pins and needles between your legs, around your genitals or back passage
- Changes to bladder and bowel function, such as loss of sensation, loss of control or an inability to empty your bladder
- Sexual problems such as loss of vaginal sensation and inability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Weakness in the legs affecting walking

If you think you are experiencing any of these symptoms you should attend your nearest A&E department.

For further information

Please email ghnt.newcastlegatesheadtims@nhs.net, ring on 0191 2138800 or visit our website at: www.tims.nhs.uk which provides online guidance and support on managing your musculoskeletal (MSK) condition effectively.

The NHS website also provides trusted online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare to help you manage your condition and/or inform your choices about your health: www.nhs.uk.

Useful links

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) can offer on-the-spot advice and information about the NHS. You can contact them on freephone 0800 032 02 02 or e-mail northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk.