

Cauda equina syndrome

Information for patients

This leaflet is about a condition called cauda equina syndrome (CES). You have been given this leaflet because the doctor or nurse wants you to be aware of the symptoms and signs in case you develop any of them after you leave the Emergency Department. It gives information about what the condition is, how it can affect you, the warning signs to look out for, and what to do if you develop these signs. If you have more questions at any time, please do not hesitate to contact a healthcare professional.

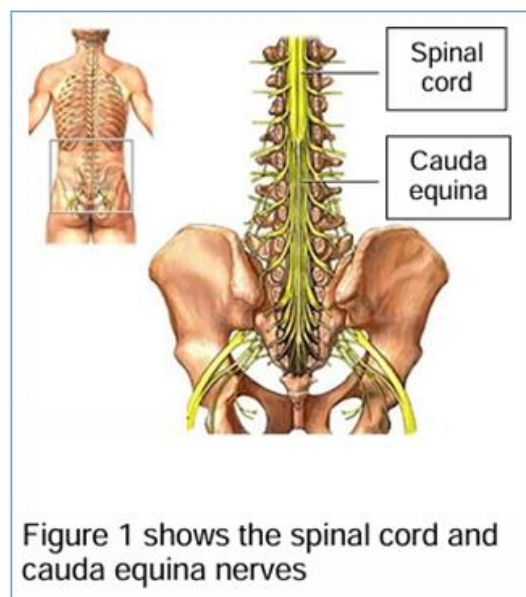
What is cauda equina syndrome (CES)?

It is a rare and serious condition (1 to 3 in 100,000 population), that affects a group of nerves called cauda equina.

The cauda equina nerves are at the lowest part of your back (see figure 1).

They perform the following functions:

- allow control of the legs
- control the bladder and bowel
- supply sensation to the skin around the bottom, back passage, genitals and inner thigh



CES occurs when this group of nerves is compressed. The most common cause of compression is when a disc in the lower back bulges into the same space as the nerves.

Common back pain and CES

Many people have a combination of back and leg pain, which can be very distressing but does not require emergency medical attention. It is best to seek advice from a physiotherapist or your GP about your symptoms and to discuss treatment options.

CES is very rare but if you develop symptoms of CES you will need to go to your local Emergency Department as soon as possible. This is because it can lead to permanent lower limb paralysis and loss of bowel, bladder and sexual function if not assessed and treated urgently.

What are the CES warning signs?

If you have back or leg pain and experience any of the following symptoms for less than 2 weeks, or you notice a deterioration in similar symptoms which you have experienced for some time, then please go to your local Emergency Department urgently.

- Loss of feeling or pins and needles between your inner thighs or genitals
- Numbness in or around your back passage or bottom
- Altered feeling when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- Increasing difficulty when you try to pee
- Increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control your flow of pee
- Loss of sensation when you pee
- Leaking of pee or recent use of pads
- Not knowing when your bladder is either empty or full
- Inability to stop a poo or leaking
- Loss of sensation when you poo
- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Loss of sensation in genitals (for example, during sexual intercourse)

Any combination or number of these warning signs could be symptoms of cauda equina syndrome. Get emergency medical help immediately.

Go to your local emergency department (A&E) and take this leaflet with you to help explain your symptoms.

If you have any questions, or if there is anything you do not understand about this leaflet, please contact the department or healthcare professional who gave you this leaflet.

Useful information

The Musculoskeletal Association of Chartered Physiotherapists (MACP) (www.macpweb.org) has created cauda equina syndrome information cards in a range of different languages.

- [Cauda Equina Syndrome Information Cards](#)

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams.

PALS at King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, London SE5 9RS

Tel: 020 3299 3601

Email: kch-tr.palsdh@nhs.net

PALS at Princess Royal University Hospital, Farnborough Common, Orpington, Kent BR6 8ND

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If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact our Communications and Interpreting telephone line on 020 3299 4826 or email kch-tr.accessibility@nhs.net