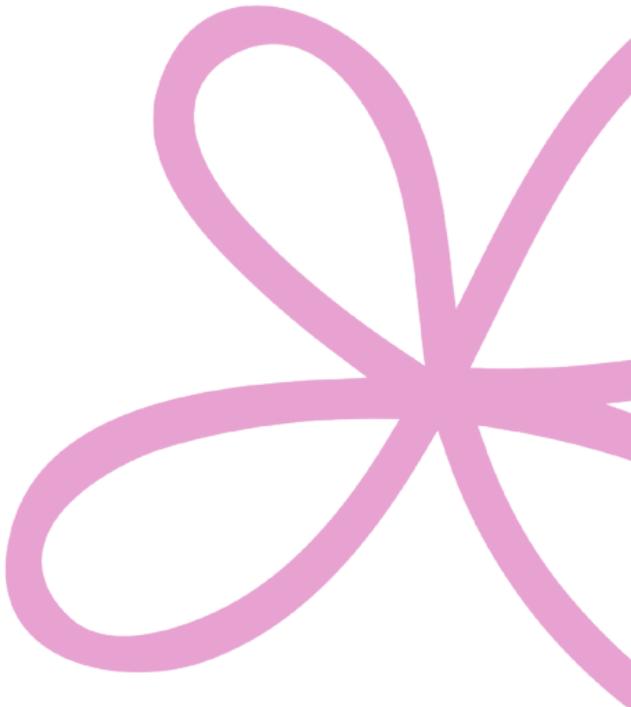




**BONE  
METASTASES**  
Cancer that has  
spread to the bone



## Introduction

**This leaflet is to tell you some important details about a possible complication of your illness.**

Although it is rare, cancer that has spread to the bones (bone metastases) can sometimes cause further problems; this can be particularly troublesome if the cancer has spread to the bones of the spine or in certain types of cancer. These problems can be managed if the clinical team caring for you are informed as soon as problems arise. This leaflet is to help you learn about the signs and symptoms to look out for and the need to let your GP or hospital specialist know if things change.

It is important to stress, that not all patients develop serious problems from cancer that has spread to their bones, but it is essential that those who do, recognise the signs and symptoms.

When cancer has spread to the bones they can become weak and brittle and there is a risk of them breaking, although this is rare.

In the spine, cancer cells can trap or squeeze the spinal cord or nerves. This pressure can cause damage to the spinal cord which may cause weakness of the body (paralysis), pain, or problems with the bladder or bowel. This is called spinal cord compression. Spinal cord compression is rare, but it is important to be aware so that you can alert health care professionals and it can be treated quickly.

If you have any of the symptoms listed it is important that you tell someone from your clinical team (either your GP, a district nurse, a member of your oncologist team, or a hospice nurse or doctor) the same day (even if it is a weekend).

Do not wait for symptoms to get worse, get advice straight away. An assessment and investigations may then be done. In a few cases urgent treatment will be needed. The earlier treatment takes place the more effective it is likely to be.

### **Signs to look for and report immediately (the same day)**

#### **Pain**

- Back pain in one part of your spine that is severe, distressing or different from your usual pain, especially if it affects the upper spine or neck or middle of your back.
- Severe increasing pain that changes with lying down or standing up, or that is worse when lifting, straining on the toilet, coughing or sneezing, walking or standing. This pain may wake you up at night or make sleeping difficult.
- Pain which starts in the spine and goes around the chest or abdomen (this is sometimes described as feeling like you are being squeezed by a band or corset).
- Pain down the leg or arm.

#### **Weakness**

- A new feeling of clumsiness or weakness of the arms or legs.
- Difficulty walking.

## **Tingling or numbness**

- Tingling, pins and needles, loss of sensation or numbness in the arms or legs.

## **Bladder or bowel problems**

- Difficulty in controlling your bladder or bowels or not being able to empty your bladder.

## **What should I do?**

### **Get advice immediately, even if it is a weekend or holiday period.**

- Phone the clinical team where you usually go for your cancer follow-up clinics, your GP, your specialist nurse or key worker.
- Describe your symptoms.
- Explain that you are worried that you may have spinal cord compression and that you need to be seen urgently.
- Show the health professional this leaflet.

## **What will happen next?**

- You will need to be examined by a doctor who may ask for extra tests. The tests that may be performed are: x-rays, a bone scan or an MRI scan.
- If the tests show that treatment is needed someone from your clinical team will discuss the options with you. The types of treatment that may be offered are: use of corticosteroids, radiotherapy, vertebroplasty, surgery or a combination of these. These are explained in the glossary.

- If these tests show that no treatment is required or you chose not to have the treatment, someone from your clinical team will answer your questions and make sure that your symptoms are under control.

## **Glossary of medical terms used in this information**

### **Bone metastases (bone secondaries)**

Cancer that has spread to the bones from somewhere else in the body.

### **Bone scan**

A scan which looks for damage to bone. A small dose of a radioactive substance is injected into the bloodstream, gets into the bones and is then photographed with a special camera called a gamma camera. Damaged bone takes up more radioactivity and so gives off more radiation. This shows up as a 'hot spot' on the scan.

### **Corticosteroids**

This is usually a drug called Dexamethasone and is given as a loading dose and then as a short course whilst treatment is planned. The dose is then slowly reduced and usually stopped. The side-effects and how to take it are explained when it is needed.

### **MRI scan (Magnetic Resonance Imaging)**

A scan using magnetism to build up a picture of the organs inside the body. These scans are painless, but are very noisy and some people feel very claustrophobic in the scanner.

You should tell your doctor if you have a pacemaker or any metal parts inside your body (such as joint replacements or surgical clips) as this may mean you cannot have this type of scan.

### **Radiotherapy**

Your doctor may suggest radiotherapy as the quickest way of relieving your bone pain. Whether this is the best treatment for you will depend on the type of cancer you have. The aim of this type of treatment is to shrink the cancer in your bones and to stop it pressing on nerves and causing pain. It can also reduce the cancer in the bone, allowing the bone to repair and strengthen itself. This can help lower the risk of fracture.

### **Surgery**

If an operation is required, your doctor will explain this to you. The purpose of the operation is to stabilise the spine. An operation may also be needed to take pressure off the spinal cord and nerves.

Other bones may also occasionally require surgical treatment, most commonly around the hip joint. If a bone metastasis weakens the bone enough, then the bone can break (this is termed a pathological fracture), and sometimes this will require an operation to pin the bone or possibly replace the hip joint.

### **Vertebroplasty**

This is an alternative treatment to surgery which may be appropriate for the stabilisation of damaged bone and to provide pain relief. It involves injecting cement into the bone under x-ray guidance.

## **Local sources of further information**

You can visit any of the health/cancer information centres listed:

### **University Hospital Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust**

#### **The Patrick Room Cancer Centre**

Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Edgbaston,  
Birmingham, B15 2TH

Telephone: 0121 371 3537/39

### **Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust**

#### **The Courtyard Centre**

Sandwell General Hospital (Main Reception)  
Lyndon, West Bromwich, B71 4HJ

Telephone: 0121 507 3792

### **Heart of England NHS Foundation Trust Health Information Centre Birmingham**

Heartlands Hospital, Bordesley Green,  
Birmingham, B9 5SS

Telephone: 0121 424 2280

### **Cancer Information and Support Centre**

Good Hope Hospital, Rectory Road, Sutton  
Coldfield, B75 7RR

Telephone: 0121 424 9486

### **Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust**

#### **Information and Support Services Walsall Palliative Care Centre**

Goscote Lane, Walsall, WS3 1SJ

Telephone: 0800 783 9050

## About this information

This guide is provided for general information only and is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Every effort is taken to ensure that this information is accurate and consistent with current knowledge and practice at the time of publication. We are constantly striving to improve the quality of our information. If you have a suggestion about how this information can be improved, please contact us via our website:

[www.birminghamhospice.org.uk](http://www.birminghamhospice.org.uk)

This information was produced by Pan Birmingham Cancer Network and was written by Consultant Surgeons, Clinical Nurse Specialists, Allied Health Professionals, patients and carers from the following Trusts:

University Hospital Birmingham Foundation Trust

Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust

Heart of England NHS Foundation Trust

Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust

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