

FACT SHEET

CAUDA EQUINA SYNDROME

What Else is it Called?

Multiple Nerve Root Compression

What Is it?

- Cauda equine is the bundle of nerves at the lower end of the spinal cord.
- Cauda equine syndrome is an uncommon case of compression of multiple nerve roots in the spinal canal.
- This nerve compression may involve multiple lumbar roots, resulting in diffuse weakness in both legs, with or without involvement of nerves supplying the bladder, rectum and/or external genitalia.
- Pressure on these nerves may result in loss of bladder control (neurogenic bladder); the bladder becomes weak, unable to empty itself, with continuous overflow leakage of urine.
- Loss of bowel control may also result as the result of a loose rectal sphincter.
- Sexual function may also be impaired; males may have an inability to have an erection (impotence).
- The syndrome may result from a herniated lumbar disc, spinal fracture or dislocation, a tumour or bone spur (spondylosis).

How Is It Diagnosed?

History:

- Symptoms can include loss of bladder control, loss of bowel control, impaired sexual function, or diffuse numbness and weakness involving both legs.
- Numbness in the perineum may be reported.
- Leg symptoms usually are reported on both sides, but one side may be more affected.

What to look for:

- Neurological examination may demonstrate muscle weakness and loss of deep tendon reflexes in the lower extremities, with numbness in the lower extremities and genital and anal area (perineum).
- There may be a loss of anal sphincter tone noted on rectal exam.

Tests:

- CT
- MRI
- Myelography
- Other X-rays or bone scan may be ordered to diagnose the underlying cause.

What is the Expected Return to Work Time?

Surgical Treatment – Disability may be permanent
Job Classification..... RTW Minimum – Maximum

Sedentary Work.....28 days – Indefinite (calendar days)
Light Work28 days – Indefinite
Medium Work.....42 days – Indefinite
Heavy Work.....Indefinite – Indefinite
Very Heavy Work.....Indefinite – Indefinite

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- If no cause for the symptoms is found in the spine, an MRI of the brain and a cystometrogram may be obtained.
- Even if fully resolved after treatment, this condition is not generally compatible with heavy work.
- Persisting neurologic deficit is usually incompatible with moderate work.

How is it Treated?

- Emergency surgery to relieve pressure on the nerves and avoid permanent nerve damage.

What is the Predicted Outcome?

- The outcome depends on the promptness of diagnosis and surgical treatment and on the nature and severity of the nerve compression. The outcome also depends on whether or not there is any permanent impairment to the bladder, rectum or leg.

What are the Work Restrictions and Accommodations?

- Work restrictions and accommodations depend on any permanent impairment to the function of the bladder, rectum or the legs.

What are the Common Prescriptions?

- Anti-inflammatories.
- Analgesics.
- Possibly narcotics in the first one-to-two weeks post surgery.

*"A safe and timely return to work benefits the patient and his or her family by enhancing recovery and reducing disability."
Canadian Medical Association*