

# Cervical Myelopathy

## Patient Information Sheet



### What Is Cervical Myelopathy?

Cervical Myelopathy is a condition which is caused by the compression of the spinal cord within the bones of the neck. To understand how it happens, it's helpful to understand how your neck works and the different medical terms which may be used to refer to it.

### What is the Cervical Spine?

There are seven bones known as vertebrae which make up the cervical spine, which is the medical term for the neck. In between each bone is a disc which acts as both a spacer between the vertebra and a shock absorber.

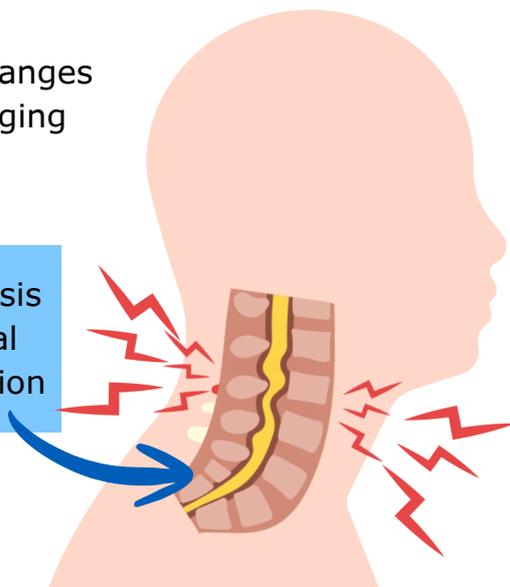
Your spinal cord runs through an opening in the vertebrae called the spinal canal, from the bottom of your spine and up into the brain. The spinal cord carries messages to and from your brain to help you to feel sensations and move your body.

### How does Cervical Myelopathy happen?

The spinal canal may narrow due to natural age-related changes such as bony overgrowths, known as osteophytes, or a bulging disc which can compress nerves.

This is called cervical stenosis. In rare cases, these changes can progress and compress the spinal cord. If the spinal cord becomes damaged due to compression, it is known as cervical myelopathy. You can see how the spinal cord is compressed in the diagram on the right.

Cervical Stenosis  
causing spinal  
cord compression



The problem may slowly worsen over time, but everyone is different. Sometimes symptoms can progress suddenly and early recognition and treatment can prevent further deterioration. Left untreated it can lead to permanent damage, pain and disability. It is important that you are aware of what symptoms to look out for and when to seek help.

### **Symptoms which could indicate cervical myelopathy include:**

- Tingling (paraesthesia) or numbness in both arms and/or both legs.
- Inability to walk at a hurried pace.
- Difficulty with fine motor skills, such as handwriting or buttoning a shirt.
- Intermittent 'electric shock' type pains into the arms and legs, especially when bending the head forward.
- Many people have a combination of neck pain, arm pain, numbness and weakness. These symptoms can be distressing, but do not necessarily require urgent medical attention.

### **If you feel that your symptoms are gradually worsening over time, either:**

- Discuss this with your physiotherapist at your next appointment.
- If you are not under the physiotherapy service contact your GP surgery for an appointment with your GP or First Contact Practitioner.

### **Attend the Emergency Department if you suddenly develop the following:**

- Major muscle weakness such as the inability to raise your arms, lift your legs or feet, or grip objects.
- Worsening ability to walk, such as tripping or falling, legs feeling heavy, feeling weak or stiff.
- Balance issues, such as unsteadiness and stumbling when walking or knocking into things – similar to feeling 'drunk'.
- Loss of feeling or pins and needles between your inner thighs or genitals, reduced sensation when wiping after toileting/washing.
- Changes to bladder function including straining to pass urine and having to wait to pass urine, loss of sensation when passing urine, leaking urine, not knowing if your bladder is either full or empty.
- Changes to bowel function including loss of sensation when passing a bowel motion or leaking.
- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate.
- Loss of sensation in genitals during sexual intercourse or inability to climax.

**For more information about myelopathy, please click on the links below:**

[Myelopathy.org](http://Myelopathy.org)

[British Association of Spine Surgeons myelopathy booklet](#)