

Cauda equina syndrome – Patient's fact sheet

National Spinal Injuries Centre, Stoke Mandeville hospital.

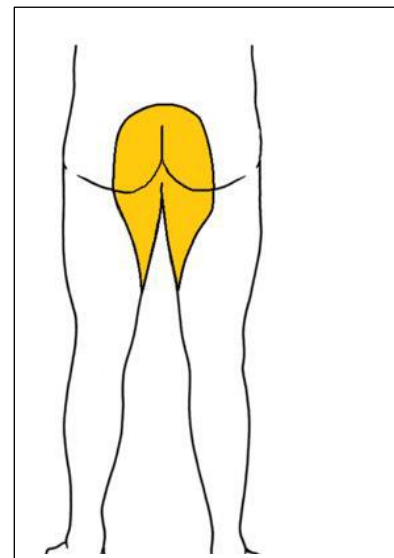
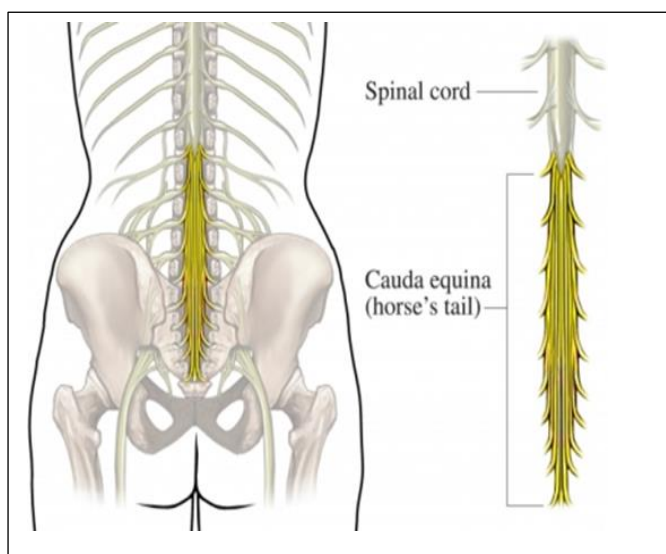


Cauda equina syndrome - The spinal cord is an extension from the brain downwards and extends inside a canal within the vertebral column (back bone). This ends just above your waist level. This continues downwards as a spray of nerves called Cauda equina which in Latin means 'horse's tail'. These nerves supply the muscles that control your bladder, bowel, legs, and sensation from groin down to the feet.

This is commonly caused by disc prolapse, spinal canal stenosis (narrowing), fractures, tumors or infection around these nerves.

The common symptoms are

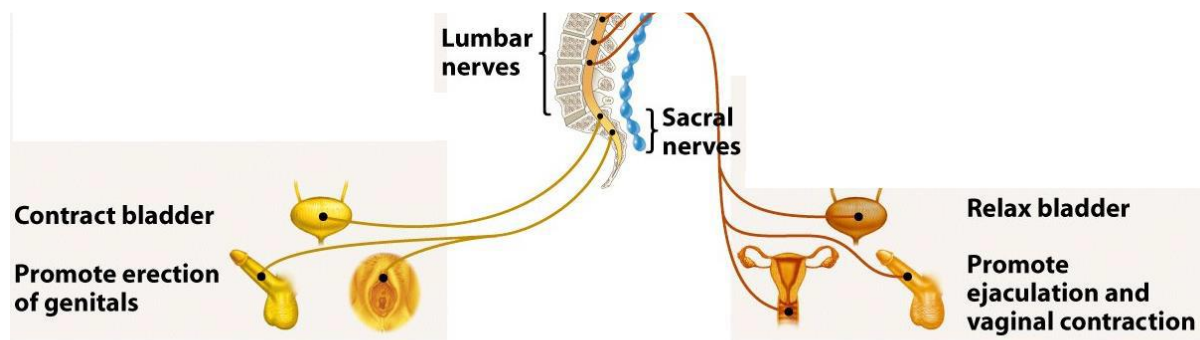
Saddle anaesthesia – is where you will not have normal feelings in the area that would sit on a saddle. You may not feel the toilet paper when you wipe your bottom. This also would include around the genital area. It is quite important to consider where you sit, as sitting on hard irregular or hot surfaces is likely to damage your skin causing pressure sores. You will be trained to safeguard your skin to prevent skin damage.



Issues with walking and mobility – A patient with Cauda equina syndrome is likely to have a change in the way they walk. This is because of involvement of the nerves that controls the muscles that control your walking. You will need an assessment by a trained Physiotherapist to teach you exercises. You will be assessed to see if you would require special splints to your knee/foot and walking aids. For those with significant mobility issues, you will be assessed by our trained therapist for wheelchair use for outdoor purpose.

Bladder and Bowel dysfunction – It is quite important that you understand your own bladder and bowel functions, or they will end up controlling your lives.

Bladder – You may have difficulty to stop passing urine (incontinence), difficulty in initiating urine (passing water). You may not appreciate when your bladder is full and may leak on straining (stress incontinence) due to poor sphincter tone which is due to weakness of muscle at the base of your bladder. You may not feel the sensation while passing water and you may not be emptying your bladder fully. If this is not addressed, you are at risk of developing frequent urinary tract infections and over a long run, can damage your kidneys. You will need assessment and training of your bladder with self-intermittent catheterisation or indwelling catheter or by other means. You may need further investigations called Urodynamics if required.



Bowels - Your ability to control your bowel motions will be affected because of floppy anal sphincter. This would facilitate faecal incontinence leading to repeated accidents. This is not only socially embarrassing but also can damage your skin. This is a difficult condition and needs assessment and can be managed by a trained specialist.

Sexual function – This is related to the same nerves that control your bladder and bowel. In males this can affect erection, ejaculation and in some patients can affect fertility. In females this can affect lubrication and orgasm. In both sexes this condition can affect the sensation in your private areas while having sexual intercourse. You will have access to the specialist team who will support you with more information and treatment strategies to overcome this.

Pain – This is one of the most common complications of the Cauda equina syndrome. As a result of damage to the nerves, you may suffer from neuropathic pain. The pain may not go away and may persist long after the injury. This in some patients will have a significant emotional impact. Successful management of chronic pain requires assessment of type, site of pain and identifying the triggers. The strategies can then be used to manage pain with either pharmaceutical or non-pharmaceutical methods. You will require specialist input to manage this debilitating condition.

Specialist equipment – You will need assessment by an Occupational therapist to assess for equipment to help you with activities of daily living (ADL's). Our in-house Occupational therapist following assessment would give a detailed report which can be followed up the community Occupational therapist. You may need a home visit by the community Occupational therapist to make sure that you are able to mobilise safely and use toilets without risk of injuries. You will receive appropriate support and advice for workplace adaptations for you to remain in employment. You will be given information regarding RADAR key which will give you access to the disabled toilets.

Psychological impact – The cauda equina syndrome is an invisible disability not known to others except the person suffering this condition. This may have varying degrees of emotional impact that can affect your everyday life. This may interfere with relationship with your spouses and other family members, affect your employment reducing your productivity. You may need professional help from a Psychologist who would help you with coping strategies. You may also get help from Spinal Injuries Association, Cauda equina UK and various other websites.

Driving – This is for those who would like to continue to drive. You will need assessment through local driving assessment centre. This information is available at www.drivingmobility.org.uk

Useful contacts

National Spinal Injuries Centre

Spinal Outpatients clinic	01296315815
Therapy	01296315828

Cauda Equina Champions Charity

www.championscharity.org.uk