You have been given this leaflet because you may have or are at risk of Cauda Equina Syndrome. It is very important that you read and understand this information.

What is the Cauda Equina Syndrome?

The spinal cord extends from the brain down through a canal inside the vertebral column. At each level of the spine nerves branch off from your spinal cord (nerve roots) and are responsible for sending signals to and from the muscles and other structures throughout your body. The spinal cord finishes just above your waist, below this is the group of nerves called the Cauda Equina. The nerves of the Cauda Equina supply the muscles that control the bladder, bowel and the legs.

Cauda Equina Syndrome is the symptoms which occur when the nerves of the Cauda Equina are compressed.

Symptoms

Cauda Equina Syndrome presents as one or a combination of the following symptoms. Most commonly these symptoms develop suddenly and may worsen rapidly, within hours or days. However some people develop symptoms gradually.

Saddle Anaesthesia

- Loss of feeling between inner thigh or genitals
- Numbness in or around the back passage or buttocks
- Altered feeling when using toilet paper when wiping yourself
Emergency department
Patient Information  Cauda Equina Syndrome

Bladder disturbance

- Increasing difficulty when you try to urinate (pass water)
- Increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control your flow of urine
- Loss of sensation when you pass urine
- Leaking urine or recent need to use pads
- Not knowing when your bladder is either full or empty

Bowel disturbance

- Inability to stop a bowel movement or leaking
- Loss of sensation when passing a bowel motion

Sexual problems

- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate (Males)
- Loss of sensation in genitals during intercourse

Cause

Numerous causes of Cauda Equina syndrome have been reported, the most common being, very large disc prolapse or spinal stenosis (a narrow spinal canal). Less common causes include tumour, infection, or trauma. Cauda Equina syndrome is rare but occurs mainly in adults but at any age.

Diagnosis

Initially the diagnosis of Cauda Equina Syndrome is made from the information that you tell the clinician who assesses you. The examination findings are useful in that they give an indication of how urgently the problem needs treatment.

In Cauda Equina Syndrome there may be a problem with your ability to feel a pin prick around your buttocks, genitals and/or back passage. The strength of the muscle which controls the back passage may be reduced. Like patients with nerve root pain you may also have changes to the sensation of the legs, strength of the leg muscles or reduced reflexes.
Investigations

A spinal scan (MRI) is essential when Cauda Equina Syndrome is suspected. The scan will confirm or rule out the condition and demonstrate which level of the spine is involved. In addition the scans help the clinician plan appropriate treatment and decide on the clinical urgency.

Treatment

If Cauda Equina Syndrome is confirmed on the scan, urgent spinal surgery is indicated, to prevent permanent damage to the nerves which supply the bladder and bowel.

Prognosis

How well people do after spinal surgery for Cauda Equina Syndrome depends on the cause, how severe the symptoms were and how long they had the symptoms before the operation.

In people who had badly affected bladder and bowel control before surgery, recovery is often incomplete, and sexual difficulties may persist.

If you suddenly develop any of the symptoms below then it is strongly recommended that you contact:
The Emergency Department

Please attend the Emergency Department if you experience any of the Cauda Equina Syndrome warning signs below:

- Loss of feeling/pins and needles between inner thighs or genitals
- Numbness in or around your back passage or buttocks
- Altered feeling when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- Increasing difficulty when you try to urinate
- Increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control your flow of urine
- Loss of sensation when you pass urine
- Leaking urine or recent need to use pads
- Not knowing when your bladder is either full or empty
- Inability to stop a bowel movement or leaking
- Loss of sensation when you pass a bowel movement
- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Loss of sensation in genitals during sexual intercourse

Cauda Equina Syndrome is a rare but serious spinal condition. It needs immediate medical examination and treatment.