

It is important to recognise the signs of a spinal cord compression and superior vena cava (SVC) obstruction.

SVC obstruction

Some tumours (particularly mediastinal) may compress or obstruct the SVC. SVC obstruction can result in breathing compromise, cerebral oedema and death.

Signs and symptoms vary according to the degree of SVC narrowing and may include:

- oedema in the head and neck region
- swelling of the upper extremities
- dysphagia (difficulty swallowing)
- cough
- hoarseness
- dyspnoea (shortness of breath or breathing difficulties)
- distorted vision
- headache
- nausea.

Spinal cord compression

Growth of metastases to the thoracic, lumbosacral and cervical spine can cause compression of the spinal cord. Swift intervention is required. Left untreated, spinal cord compression can lead to permanent damage and functional loss including paresis, paralysis and/or incontinence.

Signs and symptoms of spinal cord compression include:

- pain that is increasing (including radicular pain, referred pain and pain aggravated by coughing, movement and straining) important - pain that is increasing
- muscle weakness
- sensory loss
- numbness
- paraesthesia
- bladder and bowel dysfunction and incontinence
- ataxia (characterised by slurred speech, stumbling, falling and incoordination).