Emergency Surgery for Cauda Equina Syndrome

One-page summary of the full Spinemathema guide. Scan the QR code for the full guide, with references and audio.

Key points

- Cauda equina syndrome (CES) happens when the bundle of nerves at the bottom of the spinal canal is squashed, most often by a large disc prolapse. It is an emergency.
- Back pain or sciatica together with new numbness around your bottom or genitals, or a change in bladder, bowel or sexual function, means you should go to A&E or call 999 straight away.
- The national NHS pathway says an emergency MRI should happen as soon as possible, and no later than four hours after it is requested.
- Surgery aims to protect the nerve function you still have. It cannot reverse damage that has already happened, and recovery can continue for up to two years.
- Bladder recovery varies. Long-term studies report ongoing bladder problems in roughly 20% to 50% of people, and those who had lost bladder control before surgery tend to recover less.

Seek urgent medical help (A&E or 999) if you have back pain or sciatica with any of these:

- Numbness or altered feeling around your back passage, genitals or inner thighs (the saddle area)
- Difficulty starting to pass urine, or not being able to feel the flow
- Loss of control of your bladder or bowels that is new for you
- Not being able to feel when your bowel is full
- New problems getting an erection or ejaculating, or loss of genital sensation
- Severe or worsening weakness in both legs

Not sure how urgent it is? Call NHS 111. More warning signs: spinemathema.com/warning-signs

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General information only, not personal medical advice.
If you are worried about your symptoms, contact your GP, NHS 111, or in an emergency call 999.

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Scan for the full guide