



Chiari Malformation: Symptoms, Scans and Treatment

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

Key points

- Chiari malformation type 1 means the lowest part of the back of the brain, the cerebellar tonsils, sits lower than usual and reaches into the top of the spinal canal.
- It is often found by chance on an MRI scan done for another reason, and many people never get symptoms from it.
- The typical symptom is a headache at the back of the head that comes on with coughing, sneezing or straining.
- Some people develop a fluid-filled cavity in the spinal cord, called a syrinx, which needs specialist review.
- Surgery is considered for troublesome symptoms or problems from pressure on the spinal cord, not for an MRI finding on its own.

If you have a Chiari malformation:

- Contact your GP or specialist team for advice if you develop any new symptoms or your symptoms get worse.
- If you cannot contact your GP, or you are not sure what to do, use NHS 111 online or call 111.
- Call 999 for a life-threatening emergency, such as signs of a stroke.

Symptoms worth reporting include new numbness or weakness, problems using your hands, difficulty walking, swallowing problems, and changes in bladder or bowel control.

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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