

# Cauda Equina Syndrome (CES): What you need to know



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# A helpful guide on Cauda Equina Syndrome

Prepared by Julie Marsh, a specialist in medical negligence at Boyes Turner, this factsheet outlines the key medical and legal issues surrounding Cauda Equina Syndrome (CES) – a rare but serious condition that demands urgent care.

With extensive experience supporting those affected by CES, Julie and the team at Boyes Turner are committed to raising awareness and helping individuals understand their rights when delays in diagnosis or treatment lead to long-term harm.



# About Cauda Equina Syndrome

## **What is Cauda Equina Syndrome or CES?**

The collection of nerves at the end of the spinal cord is known as the Cauda Equina.

The nerve ends supply power and sensation to the lower limbs and sensory function to the bladder, bowel and perineum (saddle area). Cauda Equina Syndrome (CES) occurs when there is a severe compression of the nerve roots of the Cauda Equina.

Cauda Equina Syndrome can affect any of the lower body functions that are controlled or given sensation by the Cauda Equina nerves. For many people, this means CES affects their bowel, bladder and sexual function and can impact strength and movement of the lower limbs.

## **What causes CES?**

Pressure on the Cauda Equina nerves causes CES. This is almost always caused by a herniated spinal disc, although very rarely tumours, infections and inflammation can put pressure on the nerves.

## What are the warning signs for CES?

The warning signs are often referred to as “red flags” and commonly include:

- Numbness in and around your “saddle” area. The “saddle” area can involve the anus, genitals and buttock region (anywhere that might touch the saddle on a bike if you were to sit on one).
- Urinary dysfunction. This is where your bladder fills with urine but you do not experience the normal sensation of fullness or you might have issues starting the flow of urine; the stream might be poor or you might not have the sensation that you have finished passing urine. You might feel you have emptied your bladder but then realise you need to pass urine again.
- Urinary retention – Where you do not get the usual message to empty your bladder. This may be painful, or painless.
- Urinary and/or faecal incontinence.
- Weakness or paralysis of the lower limbs.
- Pain in the lower back and/or in the leg(s) (sciatica).

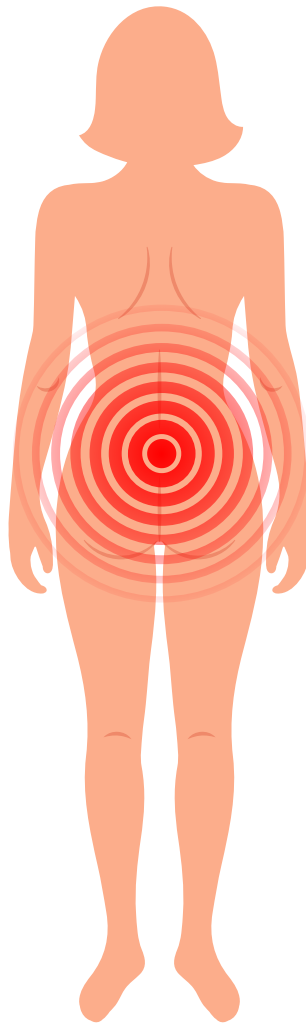


## What are the red flag symptoms and signs?

This page outlines the key red flag symptoms that may indicate the presence of Cauda Equina Syndrome. Prompt recognition and treatment are crucial to prevent permanent nerve damage and improve outcomes. If you or someone else experiences any of these symptoms, you should seek emergency medical care immediately.

### Saddle numbness

- Loss of feeling between the legs
- Numbness in or around the back passage and / or genitals
- Inability to feel the toilet paper when wiping



### Bladder disturbance

- Inability to urinate
- Difficulty initiating urination
- Loss of sensation when passing urine
- Inability to stop or control urination
- Loss of the full bladder sensation.

### Sexual problems

- Inability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Loss of sensation during intercourse
- Loss of clitoral sensation

### Bowel disturbance

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

### Back pain/ Sciatica / Leg weakness

It is quite common to have a combination of back pain, leg pain, leg numbness or weakness. These symptoms however are common in people who have a history of back problems but do not have Cauda Equina Syndrome.

## How is CES diagnosed?

CES is rare and medical professionals are often not well versed in recognising the symptoms. It is unlikely that a person will present with all the symptoms of CES, and it is important for a neurological assessment to be performed. An important test is to check perineal sensation and anal tone. The next line of investigation is usually an MRI scan, which will show whether there is a compression of the Cauda Equina nerves.

## What is the Getting It Right First Time (GIRFT) CES Pathway?



In February 2023, NHS England released an interactive Pathway to help diagnose and treat Cauda Equina Syndrome. The Pathway was reviewed and updated in October 2023. The aim of the Pathway is to speed up the diagnosis and treatment of CES.

Despite the introduction of this Pathway we continue to talk to patients who experience a delay in diagnosis of CES, and who experience delays accessing imaging, and ultimately, surgery.

## How is CES treated?

CES is treated by surgical decompression surgery to relieve the pressure on the nerves. There are typically two types of surgery in this situation, a discectomy, where a section of the damaged disc is removed or a laminectomy, where a section of bone from one of the vertebrae is removed.

The timing of the surgery is key. Timely surgery can result in a significantly improved outcome. Delays in diagnosis and performing surgery can result in permanent and life changing disability.

## Are the effects of CES permanent?

There isn't a simple answer to this question, as everyone's experience is different.

Delays in surgery can sometimes lead to more severe damage. On the other hand, if treatment is timely and appropriate, many people do see improvements in their symptoms over time. Still, even with successful and early treatment, full recovery isn't always possible.

Living with a complex condition like CES can be incredibly challenging and can touch every part of life. The physical changes can feel overwhelming, and having strong support from medical professionals, family, and friends is so important. Beyond the physical aspects, CES can also deeply affect mental health and personal relationships, making emotional support just as essential.

# About CES claims

## **How do I know if I have a claim for medical negligence related to my cauda equina diagnosis?**

If you have concerns about how your CES was diagnosed, treated, or the time it took to receive treatment, our experienced team is here to help. If we are of the view that there are issues to investigate, we may suggest that your medical records are requested or that a formal complaint is submitted as this may provide additional information which will help us focus our enquiries.

## **Should I complain about the care I have received?**

We recommend talking the issues through with a specialist solicitor to help you consider whether and to whom a complaint might be made and the issues you would like the hospital / GP or other health provider to engage with.

If you have made a complaint and have questions about the response you have received, or are not satisfied with the answers you have been given, we suggest you contact a specialist CES solicitor to discuss your options.

## What do you need to prove to succeed with a medical negligence claim?

To bring a claim for medical negligence, you need to show that a medical professional has failed to care for you properly and that as a result of this failure you have suffered an injury.

CES cases are usually brought because there has been a failure or delay in thinking the presenting symptoms may be caused by CES and this has resulted in a delay in investigation and treatment, in turn leading to a worse outcome. Independent medical experts will consider the standard of care received, whether there was any negligence and whether the negligence caused an injury.

The injured person is entitled to compensation for any injury that was caused by negligent medical care. They are also entitled to compensation for the financial consequences of that injury.



## What are the key issues in a case involving cauda equina syndrome?

Some of the common issues that arise in CES cases include:

- Should the diagnosis have been made earlier?
- Should an MRI scan have been done earlier?
- Should surgery have happened at an earlier point in time?
- Was a person given the right information about what “red flags” to look out for and when to attend hospital if their symptoms got worse?
- Did the delay in diagnosis and treatment make a difference to the eventual outcome – i.e. whether the damage to the nerves had already occurred at the time surgery should have happened;
- Whether the ongoing issues are because of the negligent care or would they have been present in any event (quite often lower back pain would always have continued, even if a diagnosis had been made and treated earlier).

## What is a CES claim worth?

There is no set amount of compensation for CES claims and the settlements vary depending on your circumstances and your ongoing symptoms. However due to the lasting consequences of CES, a CES claim tends to be classed as a higher value claim.

## Will I need to go to court?

Over 95% of the cases we take on settle successfully without the need for a trial. We understand the prospect of trial can be daunting and work with our clients to help manage the emotional journey. In our experience, meticulous preparation at every stage of the claim both minimises the chances of a trial being necessary and reduces the inevitable stress should a trial be required.

In rare circumstances, we may advise our client that for the case to proceed it must go to a court hearing. Our experienced and caring solicitors and barristers understand that this can be daunting for our clients and ensure that our clients are kept informed and feel supported.

## How do I bring a claim?

If you are concerned about the care you have received, please contact our specialist Cauda Equina Solicitors for free on [mednegclaims@boyesturner.com](mailto:mednegclaims@boyesturner.com) or by phone at [0800 124 4845](tel:08001244845).

We will listen to your concerns and talk you through the issues and your options.



# How we can help

Pursuing a medical negligence claim can be a complex and emotional journey, and it's important to know that it may not be the right path for everyone. With the support of Boyes Turner's expert medical negligence team, you can explore your options with confidence.

Our specialist solicitors combine legal expertise with a sensitive, client-focused approach to ensure you receive the guidance, support, and, where appropriate, the compensation you deserve.

## Our Medical Negligence team

Julie is a partner within our medical negligence team. She specialises in high value and complex claims for clients whose lives have been changed by Cauda Equina Syndrome (CES).

Our Medical Negligence team is ranked as leaders in their field and have over 30 years experience in supporting clients through injury claims.



Julie Marsh, Partner  
Medical Negligence



# Supporting those living with Cauda Equina Syndrome

## Cauda Equina Spinal Cord Injury CESCO



CAUDA EQUINA  
SPINAL CORD INJURY

We are proud to be a trusted partner of Cauda Equina Spinal Cord Injury or CESCO ([www.cesci.org](http://www.cesci.org)). This support group is dedicated to helping people living with CES find resources and access support. They offer online support group meetings, in person events and meetings and peer support from those who share their lived experience of cauda equina syndrome. Support is also available for the partners and wider family of the person living with CES.

In addition to support, the group is also committed to raising awareness of the red flags of Cauda Equina Syndrome and in educating medical professionals about the impact of living with CES.

## Spinal Injuries Association (SIA)



Boyes Turner works with SIA to support those living with a spinal cord injury. This organisation also works closely with CESCO, and works to support those with a spinal cord injury (SCI) lead a fulfilled life. They provide emotional, clinical and practical support and campaign for health equality and disability rights for those with SCI.

# Our previous cases

Our specialist medical negligence team has a strong track record of achieving successful outcomes in CES cases, ensuring our clients receive the support they need to move forward.

To view our previous CES case studies, please visit:

<https://www.boyesturnerclaims.com/our-cases/cauda-equina-claims>

## Featured case

# £1,330,000 settlement for patient with Cauda Equina Syndrome following GP negligence

We secured an interim payment of £70,000 to help the client adapt his living conditions, and the total settlement will now ensure his long-term care and enable a move to suitably adapted accommodation.



“

*Julie Marsh is a first rate litigator who adds real value to all her cases. I have always been impressed not just by her expertise as a clinical negligence lawyer but by the way she treats every client as an individual and works on their case as if it is the most important thing in the world, which to many clients it really is.*

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*From the first contact with Boyes Turner, I have received a professional, compassionate and first rate service. Julie Marsh has been amazing and I would recommend this firm and especially Julie to anyone. My claim was due to a traumatic experience which has resulted in an embarrassing condition. I received so much reassurance and support and would like to thank the team for that , as well as a fantastic result!*

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