

Is My Back Pain Cancer?

Written for PainChats by Dr Melissa Cady, Anaesthesiologist and Pain Specialist.

When Back Pain goes from Confusing to Scary

When people first start to experience back pain, they often go searching for information online. Back pain (or pain in other areas) can do strange things, like change location, spread to the opposite side of the body, and refer symptoms into the lower limbs. It's often tricky to make sense of such curious sensations.

Constant back pain that moves around to different locations could feel like a spreading disease, which can be worrying. Those experiencing pain and researching possible causes often come across information relating to cancer.

If you start to read about cancer, it's easy to work yourself into a state of panic about your health. Unfortunately, this panic can actually contribute to making any pain feel worse. It's easy to find information online about lung cancer, colon cancer, ovarian cancer and prostate cancer all causing back pain – but it's very uncommon in the clinic.

What You Need to Know About Cancer and Back Pain

Back pain caused by cancer is rare, but it does happen and it must not be missed in your medical care.

Only 1% of people that seek help for back pain have any serious medical condition (and cancer is only a percentage of those causes) but the seriousness of the condition is something that cannot be ignored.

People with a previous cancer diagnosis should be more vigilant, as it is not unusual to experience back pain if the cancer returns. Thus, if you have a history of cancer, and you have developed back pain, you should get a medical check without delay. This is especially true when pain seems to be almost always present, is severe or is progressively getting worse and is not improved by periods of rest. You may also notice that it gets worse at night, interfering with your sleep.

Most of the time, even with a history of cancer, back pain will just be back pain and not due to something more serious. But if you have a history of cancer it's better to play it safe.

Back pain from more benign causes will tend to be associated with specific movements, postures, or actions. It'll usually get better in four-to-six weeks.

What Do Doctors Look and Listen For?

Doctors should ask you about your pain and associated symptoms. What makes it worse or better, how long it's been affecting you, if you have had recent injections or surgery, and if you've been feeling unwell or have unusual symptoms are common questions to be prepared to answer. They may ask about signs such as pain at night that does not improve after resting, your age, whether you experience fatigue, unexplained weight loss, coughing up blood, generalised swelling in the arms or legs, lumps you can feel, discharge from the nipples, or blood in your poo.

Doctors will also examine your body, to see what extra information they can get to help understand more about your pain and if it's cause for concern. They might, for example, lightly tap to look for tender or painful spots. They might perform a variety of neurological tests that test for abnormal reflexes or decreased strength or sensation.

What Tests Will Doctors Order to Rule Out Cancer?

If your doctor is worried about the signs and symptoms that you have, they have tests that can start the process of ruling out a serious illness like cancer. While ruling out something worrying is good, it does not necessarily diagnose the cause of pain.

A blood test can reveal if there is anything unusual happening in your body. Some results might be abnormal but have nothing to do with cancer. Other abnormal results might suggest cancer but would need to be confirmed through further testing. This can be a worrying process, especially if you have a history of cancer. Make sure you ask your doctor to clarify any confusing results for you.

A spine image is another likely test. X-rays are used for looking at things like calcium-containing masses or tumours, or damage to bone that might be caused by cancerous growth weakening it. MRIs are used for seeing more detail in soft tissues than x-rays. They can reveal tumours in or around the spinal column or in the bone itself.

If you don't have abnormal blood markers, the imaging tests are negative, and you are cleared by your doctor, your back pain is very likely not due to a serious underlying illness like cancer. This might be great news, but the next step is then learning about what is causing the pain and what you can do about it.

Personal Notes and Reflections

1. What information did you read here that is relevant to your pain experience?
2. What did you read here that surprised you, or that you disagree with? Why do you think that is?
3. Are there any actions that you want to take after reading this information?

You can use your responses here to talk to your health professionals, or you can email your questions to the **PainChats** team via hello@painchats.com



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