

Patient information factsheet

Brain metastases

We have given you this factsheet because you have been diagnosed with brain metastases. It explains what brain metastases are, their symptoms and risks, and what you should do moving forward. We hope it will help to answer some of the questions you may have. If you have any further questions or concerns, contact us using the details on this factsheet.

What are brain metastases?

Cancer can spread from the primary site (the first area of the body to have cancer) to the brain. This causes brain metastases (also known as secondary brain cancer).

Brain metastases can affect how your brain works. The symptoms vary depending on the location of the metastases within the brain.

What are the common symptoms?

- headaches (often worse in the morning)
- seizures
- memory problems or confusion
- weakness or numbness
- changes in vision or speech
- problems with balance or coordination
- change in behaviour, thinking and understanding, and personality

If you experience any of these symptoms, please contact the 24-hour emergency advice line immediately.

Managing symptoms with steroid medication

Your doctor may prescribe steroid medications to improve some of the symptoms. Steroids are naturally occurring hormones and can reduce the swelling caused by the brain metastases but will not treat the tumour. Steroids have some short- and long-term side effects, so they are given for the shortest period possible. They should be taken alongside food, and are often given with another medication to protect the stomach lining.

Short-term side effects

- Increased risk of infections
- Increased blood sugar levels
- Indigestion or stomach upset
- Increased appetite and weight gain
- Mood changes and trouble sleeping

Long-term side effects

- Muscle weakness
- Thinning of bones (osteoporosis)
- High blood pressure and fluid retention
- It can affect your body's own production of steroid hormones, causing lifelong dependence
- Risk of a rare but serious lung infection which may require antibiotic prevention

Important safety information

- Always take steroids exactly as prescribed.
- Do not stop steroids suddenly unless your doctor tells you to. Stopping abruptly can make you very unwell. When your treatment is complete, you will be advised on a weaning regime.
- If you have diabetes or develop this while on treatment, you will need to monitor your blood sugars more closely, and we may need to make changes to your diabetic medications.
- Tell your doctor if you develop fevers or signs of infection

What are the risks?

Seizures

Brain metastases can increase the risk of seizures. Seizures may cause:

- sudden jerking of limbs and uncontrollable shaking
- loss of awareness, sudden collapse, and confusion
- tongue biting and changes in breathing pattern
- loss of bladder or bowel control.

We may prescribe you an anti-epileptic medication to reduce your risk. Always take this as advised.

If you experience a seizure, please call us at 023 8120 1345.

Driving

Due to the risk of seizures or sudden neurological symptoms, you must not drive or operate heavy machinery and inform your workplace.

You must inform the DVLA (or local licensing authority) and your car insurance provider of your known or suspected brain metastases. Do not drive until they have given you permission to do so. This may depend on the advice from a specialist.

Most people will be required not to drive for between 6 and 12 months after a first seizure. It is your responsibility to contact the DVLA. You can be fined up to £1000, and your insurance will be invalidated if you don't inform them.

For more information, please visit www.gov.uk/driving-medical-conditions.

Bathing and swimming

Because of the risk of seizures or sudden weakness, we recommend that you:

- use a shower rather than a bath where possible
- ensure someone is nearby to check on you if you are bathing
- avoid locking the bathroom door
- avoid swimming.

Intracranial bleeding

Some types of brain metastases are more likely to bleed, especially if you are taking a blood-thinning medication. Intracranial bleeding can cause:

- headaches
- confusion
- sudden weakness.

What you should do now

- Tell your doctor or nurse about any new or worsening symptoms.
- Stop driving immediately and notify the DVLA or licensing authority.
- Take precautions when bathing and avoid swimming.
- Take your medications as prescribed.

Useful links

Macmillan Cancer Support
www.macmillan.org.uk

DVLA contact information
www.gov.uk/contact-the-dvla

First seizure

www.uhs.nhs.uk/Media/UHS-website-2019/Patientinformation/Brain-and-spine/First-seizure-1641-PIL.pdf

Contact us

If you have concerns or need advice, please contact us.

Your cancer nurse specialist team
(Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm)

Acute oncology helpline
Telephone: **023 8120 1345** (24-hour line)

If you are a patient at one of our hospitals and need this document translated, or in another format such as easy read, large print, Braille or audio, please telephone **0800 484 0135** or email **PFSH@uhs.nhs.uk**

For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit **www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalsupport**

Join our family of charity supporters with a monthly donation!
It's a wonderful way to show your ongoing support of our patients and staff.

Scan the QR code or visit **southamptonsupporters.org/donate**



**Southampton
Hospitals
Charity**

Charity Registration Number 1051543

