



HEALTH MATTERS

Advances in spinal surgery offer relief to cancer patients

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According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), 1.4 million new cancer cases were diagnosed in the United States last year, with cancers of the prostate, breast and lung among the most common.

In addition to their prevalence, these three cancers share a common denominator. While 10 to 20 percent of all cancer patients suffer spinal cord compression, it is most common in patients who are diagnosed with these three types of cancer. The spine is the third most common site for cancer cells to metastasize following the lung and the liver.

One of the biggest issues for cancer patients with metastatic disease is pain control. They may experience neck or back pain as a result of their tumor. The pain may be coming from the spinal disease or actually from a fracture that is due to the weakening of the vertebrae. Depending on the location and extent of the disease, the pain may accompany neurological symptoms, such as weakness or numbness in the arms or legs.

It is very important for patients with cancer to report any prolonged periods of back or neck pain to their physician. When it comes to spinal metastasis, most patients who suffer from pain respond very well to non-surgical treatments. Medical treatment with steroids, chemotherapy and hormonal therapy also may be used to control the metastatic involvement and limit pain.

Radiation therapy remains the mainstay of treatment for symptomatic spinal metastasis. Patients experiencing pain from cancer that affects the vertebrae typically respond very well to radiation therapy. In fact, 60 to 80 percent of patients will experience significant relief of pain.



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Radiation therapy may also alleviate neurologic symptoms from early compression of the spinal cord and nerves. Advances in radiotherapy machinery and techniques have allowed radiation oncologists more access to previously difficult-to-access areas of the spine where the cancer has spread.

Surgical consideration is usually reserved for those patients who are experiencing rapid deterioration in their neurological function and who are otherwise not candidates for non-operative treatments.

Traditionally, surgery for spinal metastasis has involved complications and post-surgical issues, including the need for bracing. But with the evolution of spinal surgery and surgical instrumentation, surgical treatment for metastatic disease of the spine has made great strides.

The ability for surgeons to access the spine and reconstruct it from any direction has allowed for obtaining a more complete decompression of the spinal cord and a more stable restoration of the spinal column. Patients rarely require any type of bracing and usually within three weeks can go back on their usual medical treatments for the disease.

In addition to pain relief, another benefit of surgery is that it may allow many patients who could not walk or control their bladders for long periods of time to regain the ability to do so.

Certain minimally invasive techniques have also been utilized in the care of cancer patients. Kyphoplasty and vertebroplasty are two minimally invasive techniques that are currently used in selected patients. These techniques may increase the stability of the bone with the use of bone cement, which, in turn, may decrease the pain.

Because of advances in diagnostics and therapeutic modalities, most cancer patients are being diagnosed early and have a better chance at survival. For cancer patients who have involvement of the spine due to a primary cancer that has spread, newer chemotherapeutic and hormonal treatments may offer better control of the primary as well as the metastatic disease.

In addition, spinal surgery in combination with radiation therapy has been found to be an effective modality in treating patients with spinal issues caused by cancer that has spread.

Cancer patients with spinal metastasis have more options available to them today both for treatment and for pain relief. The best approach is a multidisciplinary team involving the patient, family, oncologist, radiation oncologist and spine surgeon. Such an approach can help make a significant improvement in the patient's relief from pain and quality of life.

To find a physician with Princeton HealthCare System, call (888) 742-7496 or visit www.princetonhcs.org.