



DR VANESSA SAMMONS

NEUROSURGEON



Guide to
SPINAL NERVE ROOT TUMOURS

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KEY FACTS

- A tumour is an abnormal mass of tissue that develops when cellular problems disrupt the balance between cell growth and cell death
- Symptoms of tumours that form on the spinal cord and nerve root include back pain, reduced or altered sensation and limb weakness
- Treatment options include corticosteroid injections, radiation therapy, chemotherapy and surgery
- Surgical patients are typically discharged 2-3 days following surgery, and full recovery may take as long as a year

WHAT ARE SPINAL NERVE ROOT TUMOURS?

A tumour is an abnormal lump or mass of tissue that can appear almost anywhere in the body. Tumours can be tiny nodules or large masses. They develop when the body's ability to grow, divide, and replace cells is disrupted, and an excess of cells is produced.

There are a few different tumours that can develop in or around the nerve:

Nerve Root/Nerve Sheath Tumours

- Schwannoma
- Neurofibroma
- Myxopapillary Ependymoma
- Lipoma
- Meningioma

Tumours are characterised in one of three ways:

- **Benign** – made up of non-cancerous cells
- **Premalignant** – made up of cells that have the potential to become malignant
- **Malignant** – comprised of cancerous cells

Benign tumours can (rarely) become premalignant or malignant, so it's important to monitor any growth that appears on the body.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF SPINAL NERVE ROOT TUMOURS?

Tumours put pressure on the nerve roots and can cause:

- Back pain
- Decreased sensation
- Progressive weakness
- Paralysis
- Erectile dysfunction
- Loss of bladder/bowel control
- Difficulty walking

WHAT CAUSES TUMOURS ON THE SPINAL NERVE ROOTS?

It is not yet clear why these tumours develop. They may be genetic in nature or the result of environmental toxins. Some tumours are linked to inherited syndromes such as neurofibromatosis.

WHEN SHOULD I CONSULT A DOCTOR?

Do not hesitate to consult a medical professional if you have the symptoms described above. The majority of spinal nerve root tumours are not life-threatening. "If caught early and treated aggressively, it may be possible to prevent further loss of function and regain nerve function," reports the Mayo Clinic.

HOW ARE NERVE ROOT TUMOURS DIAGNOSED?

An initial consultation regarding pain caused by tumours begins with a discussion of your symptoms. Next, your doctor will discuss your medical history to rule out other conditions that have similar symptoms. A physical exam completes the preliminaries. When doctors suspect a nerve root tumour, they may order tests to understand the tumour more fully:

- **Spinal MRI** – creates accurate images of the spine, spinal cord, and nerves
- **Biopsy** – to determine whether a tumour is cancerous or benign

An accurate and comprehensive view of a spine tumour or nerve root tumour helps doctors determine which treatment or procedure will help achieve optimal healing.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR SPINAL NERVE ROOT TUMOURS?

Benign spinal tumours that are too small to cause symptoms may simply be monitored. Other tumours likely will require surgery. The goal of surgery is to excise the tumour completely without compromising spinal cord and/or nerve function. Two key considerations include:

- What type of tumour it is
- From what structure does it originate

The procedure is performed under general anaesthesia. An incision is made in the skin overlying the tumour and the surgeon works to carefully dissect the tumour from the surrounding structures. (Complete excision is not always possible and tumours may be treated post-surgically with chemotherapy or radiation.) The incision is stitched and closed with a dissolving suture and covered with a dressing.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT AFTER SURGERY?

After surgery for a nerve root tumour, you will be taken to an observation room where your progress will be monitored. When you wake up, you may feel drowsy and nauseous. You may experience discomfort at the treatment site. Oral and intravenous pain medications will help to keep you comfortable.

You will be taken to your hospital room when you are stable. Most patients are discharged after 2-3 days and given a prescription for oral pain medication.

WHAT SHOULD I DO AFTER SURGERY?

Self-care is an important part of a successful recovery. You will be provided with guidelines which should be followed carefully regarding bathing, a return to normal activities, and whether or not you will need rehabilitation or physical therapy.

SHOULD I FOLLOW UP WITH DR SAMMONS AFTER SURGERY?

Yes. You will need to see Dr Sammons for a follow-up visit after surgery. A practice nurse will reach out to you after you have returned home to schedule your appointment. Should you have any concerns prior to your visit, Dr Sammons is happy to talk with you earlier to address them.

Please call our rooms if you have any additional concerns or questions.



Hello!

I'm a Neurosurgeon at North Shore Private Hospital, Gosford Private Hospital, Brisbane Waters Private Hospital and the Sydney Adventist Hospital. I treat all neurosurgical conditions, but with a particular interest in Peripheral Nerve Surgery. I pride myself on providing personalised and thoughtful patient care and utilising my skills to achieve the best outcome possible.

I believe that a great neurosurgeon will ensure you feel listened to, will ensure that you understand what your surgery involves, and should also work together with your GP to achieve the best outcome for you.

Dr Vanessa

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