

ACUTE AND SUBACUTE SPINAL CORD DISEASES

The initial symptoms of structural diseases of the cord that evolve over days or weeks are focal neck or back pain, followed by various combinations of paresthesias, sensory loss, motor weakness, and sphincter disturbance. There may be only mild sensory symptoms or a devastating functional transection of the cord. Partial lesions selectively involve the posterior columns or anterior spinothalamic tracts or are limited to one side of the cord. Paresthesias or numbness typically begins in the feet and ascend symmetrically or asymmetrically. These symptoms simulate a polyneuropathy, but a sharply demarcated spinal cord level indicates the myelopathic nature of the process.

In severe and abrupt cases, areflexia reflecting spinal shock may be present, but hyperreflexia supervenes over days or weeks; persistent areflexic paralysis with a sensory level usually indicates necrosis over multiple segments of the spinal cord.

APPROACH TO THE PATIENT: Compressive and Noncompressive Myelopathy

DISTINGUISHING COMPRESSIVE FROM NONCOMPRESSIVE MYELOPATHY

The first priority is to exclude a treatable compression of the cord by a mass that may be amenable to treatment. The common causes are tumor, epidural abscess or hematoma, herniated disk, and vertebral pathology. Epidural compression due to malignancy or abscess often causes warning signs of neck or back pain, bladder disturbances, and sensory symptoms that precede the development of paralysis. Spinal subluxation, hemorrhage, and noncompressive etiologies such as infarction are more likely to produce myelopathy without antecedent symptoms. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) with gadolinium, centered on the clinically suspected level, is the initial diagnostic procedure if it is available; in some cases, it is appropriate to image the entire spine (cervical through sacral regions) to search for additional clinically inapparent lesions. Once compressive lesions have been excluded, noncompressive causes of acute myelopathy that are intrinsic to the cord are considered, primarily vascular, inflammatory, and infectious etiologies.

COMPRESSIVE MYELOPATHIES

Neoplastic Spinal Cord Compression In adults, most neoplasms are epidural in origin, resulting from metastases to the adjacent vertebral column. The propensity of solid tumors to metastasize to the vertebral column probably reflects the high proportion of bone marrow located in the axial skeleton. Almost any malignant tumor can metastasize to the spinal column, with breast, lung, prostate, kidney, lymphoma, and myeloma being particularly frequent. The thoracic spinal column is most commonly involved; exceptions are metastases from prostate and ovarian cancer, which occur disproportionately in the sacral and lumbar vertebrae, probably from spread through Batson's plexus, a network of veins along the anterior epidural space. Retroperitoneal neoplasms (especially lymphomas or sarcomas) enter the spinal canal laterally through the intervertebral foramina and produce radicular pain with signs of weakness that corresponds to the level of involved nerve roots.

Pain is usually the initial symptom of spinal metastasis; it may be aching and localized or sharp and radiating in quality and typically worsens with movement, coughing, or sneezing and characteristically awakens patients at night. A recent onset of persistent back pain, particularly if in the thoracic spine (which is uncommonly involved by spondylosis), should prompt consideration of vertebral metastasis. Rarely, pain is mild or absent. Plain radiographs of the spine and radionuclide bone scans have a limited role in diagnosis because they do not identify 15–20% of metastatic vertebral lesions and fail to detect paravertebral masses that reach the epidural space through the intervertebral foramina. MRI provides excellent anatomic resolution of the extent of spinal tumors (Fig. 456-2) and is able to distinguish between malignant lesions and other masses—epidural abscess, tuberculoma,

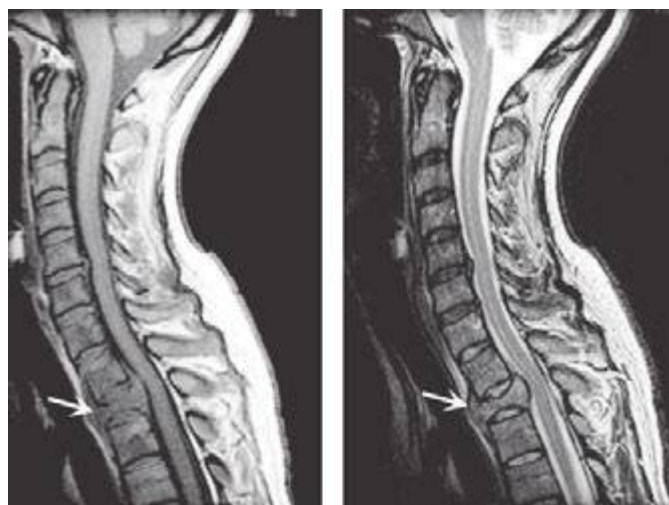


FIGURE 456-2 Epidural spinal cord compression due to breast carcinoma. Sagittal T1-weighted (A) and T2-weighted (B) magnetic resonance imaging scans through the cervicothoracic junction reveal an infiltrated and collapsed second thoracic vertebral body with posterior displacement and compression of the upper thoracic spinal cord. The low-intensity bone marrow signal in A signifies replacement by tumor.

lipoma, or epidural hemorrhage, among others—that present in a similar fashion. Vertebral metastases are usually hypointense relative to a normal bone marrow signal on T1-weighted MRI; after the administration of gadolinium, contrast enhancement may deceptively “normalize” the appearance of the tumor by increasing its intensity to that of normal bone marrow. Infections of the spinal column (osteomyelitis and related disorders) are distinctive in that, unlike tumor, they often cross the disk space to involve the adjacent vertebral body.

If spinal cord compression is suspected, imaging should be obtained promptly. If there are radicular symptoms but no evidence of myelopathy, it may be safe to defer imaging for 24–48 h. Up to 40% of patients who present with cord compression at one level are found to have asymptomatic epidural metastases elsewhere; thus, the length of the spine is often imaged when epidural malignancy is in question.

TREATMENT NEOPLASTIC SPINAL CORD COMPRESSION

Management of cord compression includes glucocorticoids to reduce cord edema, local radiotherapy (initiated as early as possible) to the symptomatic lesion, and specific therapy for the underlying tumor type. Glucocorticoids (dexamethasone, up to 40 mg daily) can be administered before an imaging study if there is clinical suspicion of cord compression and the medication is continued at a lower dose until definitive treatment with radiotherapy (generally 3000 cGy administered in 15 daily fractions) and/or surgical decompression is completed. In one randomized controlled trial, initial management with surgery followed by radiotherapy was more effective than radiotherapy alone for patients with a single area of spinal cord compression by extradural tumor; however, patients with recurrent cord compression, brain metastases, radiosensitive tumors, or severe motor symptoms of >48 h in duration were excluded from this study. Radiotherapy alone may be effective even for some typically radioresistant metastases. A good response to therapy can be expected in individuals who are ambulatory at presentation. Treatment usually prevents new weakness, and some recovery of motor function occurs in up to one-third of patients. Motor deficits (paraplegia or quadriplegia), once established for >12 h, do not usually improve, and beyond 48 h the prognosis for substantial motor recovery is poor. Although most patients do not experience recurrences in the months following radiotherapy, with survival beyond 2 years, recurrence becomes