

Spinal Cord Injury: Contusions and Compressions of the Spinal Cord

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The most common types of spinal cord injury are contusions and compressions. Unlike most other parts of the human body that get contused (bruised) or compressed (pressured), the spinal cord when so affected can lead to severe and permanent dysfunction. Spinal contusions occur when the spinal cord is bruised, often causing inflammation and bleeding from blood vessels near the injury site. Spinal compressions occur when pressure is applied to the spinal cord by an outside source, such as bones, from a vertebral fracture, or blood, from an adjacent hematoma. Since the spinal cord is composed of neural pathways that cannot regenerate once they are destroyed, spinal contusions and compressions can lead to permanent paralysis. Spinal contusions and compressions are usually medical emergencies, requiring immediate treatment.

Spinal contusions and compressions cause disruption of the nerve impulses. The more substantial the contusion or compression, then the more severe is the disruption of the nerve impulses. Once compression of the spinal cord begins to cause symptoms, the patient is at risk of rapid deterioration. Fortunately, MRI scanning or myelography can quickly identify the location and extent of the spinal compression.

If the spinal compression is detected before the neural pathways are destroyed, emergency treatment may prevent permanent injuries to the spinal cord. Emergency surgery, designed to decompress the spinal cord or to surgically drain accumulated blood caused by a hematoma, can sometimes save the patient from permanent damage. In some instances the use of corticosteroids can sufficiently reduce swelling around the spinal cord so as to prevent further damage.

Spinal contusions and compressions are not uncommon in cases handled by personal injury and medical malpractice trial lawyers. Motor vehicle accidents frequently are the precipitating causes of such spinal injuries. Additionally, where the health care providers fail to timely recognize and treat spinal contusions and compressions, there may exist viable medical malpractice actions. The trial lawyer involved in such cases needs to be well versed in the mechanism, symptoms and treatment of spinal cord contusions and compressions.

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