

Spinal Cord Injury: Cauda Equina Syndrome

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The term “cauda equina” literally means “horse’s tail” and refers to the bundle of spinal nerve roots located at the base of the spine. These nerve roots extend from the base of the spine downward into the lower part of the body. Compression, irritation, or other trauma to these nerve roots can result in multiple symptoms, ranging from mild sciatica to complete paralysis. Early symptoms of cauda equina syndrome often include bowel and bladder dysfunction or pain or weakness in the buttocks and thigh area. Cauda equina syndrome can be caused by trauma, infectious conditions, or post-surgical complications. Cauda equina syndrome is usually a medical emergency, requiring immediate surgery to decompress the nerves so as to prevent permanent injury. The longer the delay in decompressing the spinal cord and nerves, the more likely the patient will suffer permanent loss of function. The diagnosis of the condition can be made quickly based upon the signature symptoms of cauda equina syndrome and radiologic imaging in the form of MRI or CT scans. Consequently, failure to timely diagnose and treat patients suffering from cauda equina syndrome may constitute medical negligence and serve as a basis for a medical malpractice action.

Trial lawyers whose clients suffer from cauda equina syndrome should be well versed in the etiology and treatment of the condition. Victims of automobile accidents, falls, and other trauma may develop cauda equina syndrome. Additionally, in situations where the health care providers fail to timely recognize, diagnose and treat the condition, there may exist viable medical malpractice claims. Cauda equina syndrome is a potentially devastating spinal condition that, without immediate treatment, unfortunately often results in permanent loss of function and chronic pain for the injured person.

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