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## SPINE EDUCATION

### RED FLAGS FOR SERIOUS SPINAL PATHOLOGY

When assessing a patient with spinal/limb pain, it is important to look for the presence of red flags, which may indicate an underlying spinal pathology. If a serious condition is suspected, an urgent or emergency referral to the local spinal unit may be necessary, although a degree of clinical judgement is required when referring these cases.

### RED FLAGS FOR SPINAL METASTASES

- Constant severe mechanical spinal pain
- Progressive spinal pain despite conservative treatment
- Persistent thoracic spine pain
- Patient age under 20 or over 50 with back pain for the first time
- Personal or family history of cancer
- Unexplained weight loss, cachexia, loss of appetite
- Structural deformity of spine

### RED FLAGS FOR SPINAL INFECTION

- Constant severe spinal pain which continues when supine. May worsen at night
- Unexplained fever, malaise or lethargy
- Recent bacteraemic infection, UTI, or endoscopic procedure
- Immune suppression risk factors: diabetes, alcohol dependence, IV drug misuse or HIV
- Structural deformity of spine

### RED FLAGS FOR CAUDA EQUINA SYNDROME

- Recent onset urinary retention with overflow incontinence
- Recent onset faecal incontinence
- Bilateral sciatica, leg numbness or weakness
- Progressive bilateral neurological deficit in the legs
- Perineal / saddle anaesthesia
- Lax anal sphincter

### RED FLAGS FOR SPINAL FRACTURE

- History of fall or spinal trauma
- History of osteoporosis
- Long-term steroid medication