

# Spinal epidural abscess clinical features

Should be considered in a [patient](#) with [back pain](#), [fever](#), and [spine tenderness](#)

[Spinal epidural abscess](#) usually presents with excruciating pain localized over [spine](#) with [tenderness](#) to percussion.

[Radicular](#) symptoms follow with subsequent distal [cord](#) findings, often beginning with [bowel/bladder](#) disturbance, abdominal distension, [weakness](#) progressing to para- and [quadriplegia](#). Average time is 3 days from back pain to root symptoms; 4.5 days from root pain to weakness; 24 hrs from [weakness](#) to [paraplegia](#).

Fever, sweats or rigors are common, but are not always present <sup>1)</sup>.

A furuncle (skin boil) somewhere on the body may be identified in 15%.

Patients may be encephalopathic. This may range from mild to severe and may further delay diagnosis. Meningismus with a positive Kernig sign may occur.

Patients with postoperative SEA may demonstrate surprisingly few signs or symptoms (including lack of leukocytosis, lack of fever) aside from local pain <sup>2)</sup>

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Clinical signs, duration of symptoms and the rate of neurological deterioration show a high inter-individual variability, and the classic triad (spinal pain, fever and neurological deficit) is often not found, especially not at first presentation to a physician. However, most patients complain of severe localized back pain.

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In a study from 34 patients only three (42.9%) of the seven patients who died or acquired plegia presented with the three-symptom of [spinal epidural abscess clinical features](#) classic triad of fever, neurologic symptoms, and neck or back pain. <sup>3)</sup>

<sup>1)</sup>  
Curry WT,Jr, Hoh BL, Amin-Hanjani S, et al. Spinal epidural abscess: clinical presentation, management, and outcome. Surg Neurol. 2005; 63:364- 71; discussion 371

<sup>2)</sup>  
Spiegelmann R, Findler G, Faibel M, et al. Postoperative Spinal Epidural Empyema: Clinical and Computed Tomography Features. Spine. 1991; 16:1146-1149

<sup>3)</sup>  
King C, Fisher C, Brown PCM, Priest KC, Tanski M, Sullivan P. Time-to-completed-imaging, survival and function in patients with spinal epidural abscess: Description of a series of 34 patients, 2015-2018. BMC Health Serv Res. 2020 Feb 14;20(1):119. doi: 10.1186/s12913-020-4973-5. PubMed PMID: 32059715; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC7023770.

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