

BACK PAIN

SPINAL STENOSIS

SPINAL STENOSIS IN THE LOW BACK

Introduction

The spinal canal is the spine's central passageway, through which the spinal cord descends from the brain to the lower back.

The spinal cord contains the nerves which send and receive signals between the body and the brain; those corresponding to the lower back are responsible for controlling leg, bowel and bladder function.

If the spinal canal is too narrow, these nerves become pinched or compressed, causing pain, numbness, or weakness in the legs, feet, or buttocks.

Causes of spinal stenosis

Ageing is the most common cause of spinal stenosis, with the majority of cases occurring in individuals over 50 years old.¹



Over time, the following may occur:

- The tissue connecting the bones and joints of the spine becomes thicker and harder
- Spinal bones and joints may increase in size
- Arthritis can cause bone spurs (or lumps) on the spine that create pressure on surrounding nerves
- The discs between the vertebrae may become displaced, pushing out into the spinal canal

Aside from age, spinal stenosis might be caused by injury, tumor, congenital (birth) defect, or by other, less common, causes. For this reason, it is important to be correctly diagnosed by a specialist who can rule out any underlying conditions.

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Symptoms of spinal stenosis

- Numbness, weakness, or cramping in the legs, buttocks, or feet
- Pain in the above areas, becoming worse with walking, standing up straight, or leaning back
- Pain that radiates down the leg
- Stiffness in the legs and thighs
- Low back pain in general
- Loss of bladder and bowel control (severe cases)

Diagnosing stenosis

The first step in diagnosing spinal stenosis is an initial doctor's visit, in which a complete medical history and physical examination is performed. This is followed by imaging tests in order to confirm the initial findings and pinpoint the exact nature and location of the stenosis.²

What is the treatment for spinal stenosis?

When considering treatment, you should discuss and understand all of your options with your doctor.

Conservative treatment

Also known as "observation", conservative treatment allows the body time to recover on its own. A program of rest and carefully planned exercises is followed during this time. Conservative treatment does not mean "doing nothing". It means actively paying attention to the body and its progress.

Physical therapy

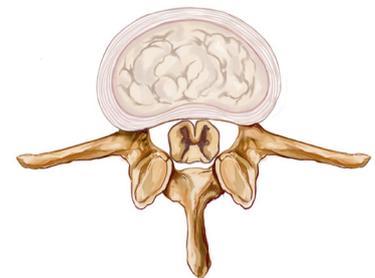
Also known as manual therapy, physical therapy involves working with a professional physiotherapist to follow a rehabilitation and exercise program. Physical therapy can keep the body active and shorten recovery time.

Chiropractic

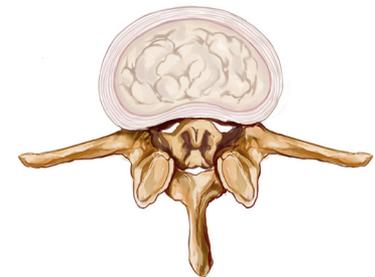
This is a manual treatment in which a specially trained practitioner uses carefully controlled pressure on the joints of the spine (spinal manipulation or spinal adjustment) in order to improve movement and relax the muscles.

Medication (NSAIDs)

This type of medication can be bought over the counter or prescribed by a doctor. Ibuprofen is an example of a common NSAID (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug). Each NSAID will have side effects and particular instructions which need to be understood before they are used. It's important to talk to your doctor before beginning treatment with an NSAID.



Normal



Stenosis

Medication(TFESIs)

If physical therapy and NSAIDs do not provide relief, TFESIs (transforaminal epidural steroid injections, or epidural corticosteroid injections) have been found to be as much as 80% effective for short-term pain relief. One to three injections are usually needed to provide relief, and there is a risk of stroke or spinal cord injury with this treatment.³ A doctor may also prescribe a spinal injection of corticosteroid, a medicine that reduces inflammation.

Surgery

While some research shows better results over a four year period for people undergoing surgery for spinal stenosis, these benefits have not been proven to last beyond six to eight years.⁴ One study in particular found no difference in improvement or pain relief between individuals who had undergone surgery for stenosis and those who had followed a physical therapy program.⁵ It is important to understand that symptoms such as weakness and numbness may persist even right after surgery.⁶ Finally, 24% of individuals undergoing spinal stenosis surgery experience side effects.⁷ For this reason, it is important to weigh the benefits against possible side effects.



Questions about your diagnosis?

Unsure which treatment is right for you?

Did you know you have access to a free, independent and confidential decision support service?

Discuss your concerns and have your case reviewed by a specialist in your condition.

The decision is yours. And we're with you all the way.



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