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Spinal stenosis



Spinal stenosis is narrowing of the spinal column that causes pressure on the spinal cord, or narrowing of the openings (called neural foramina) where spinal nerves leave the spinal column.

Causes

Spinal stenosis usually occurs as a person ages.

- The disks become drier and start to bulge.
- The bones and ligaments of the spine thicken or grow larger. This is caused by arthritis or long-term swelling.

Spinal stenosis may also be caused by:

- [Arthritis](#) of the spine, usually in middle-aged or elderly people
- Bone diseases, such as [Paget disease](#)
- Defect or growth in the spine that was present from birth
- [Herniated](#) or slipped disk, which often happened in the past
- Injury that causes pressure on the nerve roots or the spinal cord
- [Tumors](#) in the spine

Symptoms

Symptoms often get worse slowly over time. Most often, symptoms will be on one side of the body, but may involve both legs.

Symptoms include:

- [Numbness](#), cramping, or pain in the back, buttocks, thighs, or calves, or in the neck, shoulders, or arms
- [Weakness](#) of part of a leg or arm

Symptoms are more likely to be present or get worse when you stand or walk. They often lessen or disappear when you sit down or lean forward. Most people with spinal stenosis cannot walk for a long period.

More serious symptoms include:

- Difficulty or poor balance when walking
- Problems controlling urine or bowel movements

Exams and Tests

During a physical exam, your doctor will try to find the location of the pain and figure out how it affects your movement. You will be asked to:

- Sit, stand, and walk. While you walk, your doctor may ask you to try walking on your toes and then your heels.
- Bend forward, backward, and sideways.
- Lift your legs straight up while lying down. If the pain is worse when you do this, you may have sciatica, especially if you also feel numbness or tingling in one of your legs.

Your doctor will also move your legs in different positions, including bending and straightening your knees. This is to check your strength and ability to move.

To test nerve function, the doctor uses a rubber hammer to check your reflexes. To test how well your nerves sense feeling, the doctor touches your legs in many places with a pin, cotton swab, or feather.

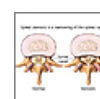
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Patient Instructions

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A brain and nervous system (neurologic) examination helps confirm leg weakness and [decreased sensation](#) in the legs. The following tests may be done:

- [EMG](#)
- [Spinal MRI](#) or [spinal CT](#) scan
- [X-ray of the spine](#)

Treatment

Your doctor and other health professionals will help you manage your pain and keep you as active as possible.

- Your doctor may refer you for physical therapy. The physical therapist will teach you stretches and exercises that make your back muscles stronger.
- You may also see a [chiropractor](#), a massage therapist, and someone who performs acupuncture. Sometimes a few visits will help your back or neck pain.
- Cold packs and heat therapy may help your pain during flare-ups.

Treatments for back pain caused by spinal stenosis include:

- [Medicines that may help with your back pain](#).
- A type of talk therapy called [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) to help you better understand your pain and teach you how to manage back pain.
- An epidural spinal injection (ESI) involves injecting medicine directly into the space around your spinal nerves or spinal cord.

Spinal stenosis symptoms often become worse over time, but this may happen slowly. If the pain does not respond to these treatments, or you lose movement or feeling, you may need surgery.

- Surgery is done to relieve pressure on the nerves or spinal cord.
- You and your doctor can decide when you need to have surgery for these symptoms.

Surgery may include [removing a bulging disc](#), [removing part of the vertebra bone](#), or [widening the opening where your spinal nerves are](#).

After some spinal surgery, the surgeon may fuse some of the spine bones to make your spine more stable.

Outlook (Prognosis)

Many people with spinal stenosis are able to be active with the condition, although they may need to make some changes in their activities or work.

Spine surgery will often partly or fully relieve symptoms. It is hard to predict if you will improve and how much relief surgery will provide.

- Persons who had long-term back pain before their surgery are likely to have some pain after.
- If you needed more than one kind of back surgery, you may be more likely to have future problems.
- The area of the spinal column above and below a spinal fusion are more likely to be stressed and have problems in the future.

Rarely, changes caused by pressure on the nerves may be permanent, even if the pressure is relieved.

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Call your health care provider if you have symptoms of spinal stenosis.

More serious symptoms that need prompt attention include:

- Difficulty or poor balance when walking
- Worsening numbness and weakness of your limb
- Problems controlling urine or bowel movements
- Problems urinating or having a bowel movement

Alternative Names

Pseudo-claudication; Central spinal stenosis; Foraminal spinal stenosis; Degenerative spine disease; Back pain - spinal stenosis

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