

SPINAL STENOSIS

About the Spine

The spine, also called the backbone or spinal column, is made up of 33 bones (vertebrae) from the bottom of the skull to the buttocks. Ligaments connect these bones. Between most vertebrae are flattened, round structures (intervertebral disk) composed of a soft substance in the middle and stronger outer covering. The spinal cord, which holds the nerves, runs through and is protected by vertebrae. Muscles in the back and abdomen support the spine.

What Is Spinal Stenosis?

Spinal stenosis is a narrowing in a part of the spine.

What Causes Spinal Stenosis?

The cause is usually wear and tear, past injury, disk rupture (herniation), or osteoarthritis related to aging. As disks between vertebrae wear out, spaces between vertebrae narrow. Vertebrae become deformed and may develop spurs (bony outgrowths or bulges) that can compress spinal nerves.

What Are the Symptoms of Spinal Stenosis?

Symptoms depend on which area of the spine is narrowed. Narrowing of the lower part produces pain in the lower back, buttocks, and thighs. In severe cases, legs or arms may become deformed and may become numb and weak. Pinching (compression) of a spinal nerve root may cause intense pain on the buttocks or down the leg. *Sciatica* means pain in the leg caused by pinching, swelling (inflammation), or injury of the sciatic nerve. This nerve runs from the lower spine, down the buttock and back of the knee to the foot. Numbness and pins and needles may also be felt. Spinal stenosis pain is worse during walking (especially downhill) or standing and gets better by bending forward.

How Is Spinal Stenosis Treated?

Physical therapy may help reduce pain and improve mobility. Over-the-counter pain relievers, such as acetaminophen, or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, can help. For really severe pain, stronger narcotic medicines may be used. All opioids may also cause drowsiness and constipation. Surgery is used only for pain that doesn't go away. The operation may remove the disk (discectomy) to relieve pressure on a nerve, or remove part of the bony arch, or lamina, of a vertebra (laminectomy) for a herniated disk.

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DOs and DON'Ts in Spinal Stenosis:

- **DO** take medicines as prescribed.
- **DO** call your doctor if you have drug side effects.
- **DO** call your doctor if you have new numbness or tingling in your legs.
- **DO** call your doctor if you have trouble urinating or lose control of your bowels or bladder.
- **DON'T** wait for a drug side effect to go away on its own.
- **DON'T** stop exercising completely.