

Cervical Radiculopathy

This leaflet aims to give you some information about cervical radiculopathy and what you can do to help manage the symptoms you are experiencing.

What is a cervical radiculopathy?

Cervical radiculopathy refers to nerve irritation in the neck that can cause symptoms including pins and needles, numbness, and weakness. You may also experience neck and arm pain alongside these symptoms.

Cervical radiculopathy can be caused by a number of different factors including age related changes to the spine such as disc bulges or facet joint osteoarthritis.

How is Cervical Radiculopathy Diagnosed?

Cervical radiculopathy can be diagnosed by your GP, a physiotherapist or a clinical specialist, from the signs and symptoms you describe alongside an examination, which may include:

- Movements of the neck
- Nerve tests including, sensation, reflexes and muscle power
- Nerve stretching tests

What's wrong with me?

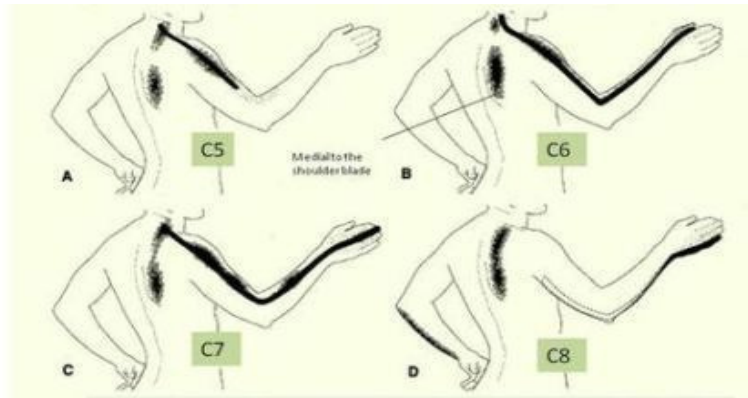
As you get older, your spine will age as well and these changes can affect the tissues that make up the spine. For example, the discs of the spine may become thinner, bulge, and ligaments can stiffen. This process starts around the age of 25-30 and is a normal aging process.

In all the body's joints, there is a constant process of "wear and repair" happening, as the joints adapt to the stresses and strains of normal everyday life. For example, small bony nodules called osteophytes will develop at areas of increased pressure. These changes can lead to a narrowing of the holes in the neck that nerve pass through, increasing pressure on nerves.

These changes occur over many years, like wrinkles on our skin. For most people, these changes do not cause any symptoms. Up to 80% of individuals over the age of 60 will have visible signs on an X-ray and MRI, however few will get pain. In a very small percentage of people the symptoms may be caused by underlying pathology such as infections or malignancies.

How can this affect me?

Nerve symptoms are felt in the arm and depending on the part of the spine that is affected. This usually occurs in the area of the body the affected nerve travels to. The pictures below demonstrate common patterns of symptoms into the arm.



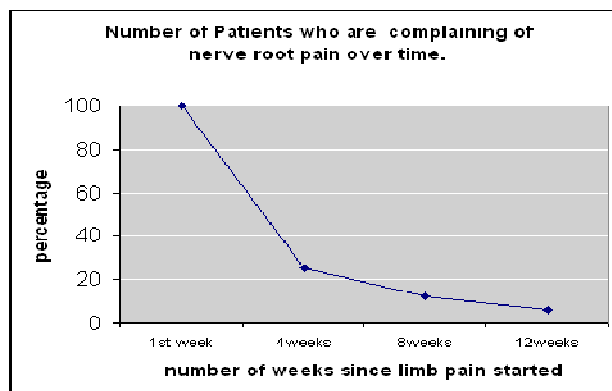
What are the main symptoms of radiculopathy?

Irritation of the nerves in the spine can cause a variety of symptoms, which differ from person to person. Common symptoms include:

- Pain and increased sensitivity in arms and cervical spine
- Pins and needles and numbness in arm or hand
- Muscle weakness in the arm or hand
- Altered sensation in the arm or hand, this can be increased or reduced feeling.
- Nerve pain is usually described as burning in nature, and normally spreads below the elbow in the affected limb.
- Often nerve pain and neck pain are present at the same time

How long will it take to get better?

Research shows 60 to 80% will see significant improvements in their symptoms within 6 weeks, and most people have fully recovered by 3 months. Some people can experience low grade symptoms for several months.



Medications and therapies can help but there isn't usually a "quick fix". There is a need to wait for natural recovery to take place. If the pain isn't getting better, is really affecting your ability to function, and you have had it for more than 4 weeks, you should seek further assessment from your GP.

What I can do to help myself get better?

Although cervical radiculopathy can affect your quality of life, it is not serious or dangerous. Your neck is still strong and you should remain as active as possible.

If your symptoms are manageable then it is unlikely that an injection or surgery is needed. Most people with cervical radiculopathy can successfully manage their symptoms with simple less risky treatments, called conservative treatment options.

While it is common that people with these symptoms will look for someone to treat them, it is more effective to find a strategy that allows you to be in control and manage your symptoms.

Conservative treatment options

1. Managing pain

You can take over the counter painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. Your GP or Pharmacist can provide further guidance on the risks of these and how to use them effectively.

If your symptoms are more severe, then discuss nerve pain modifying drugs (called neuropathic pain medication) with your GP. Examples are gabapentin or pregabalin and amitriptyline. Pain medication is usually most effective when combined with an exercise programme.

2. Pace yourself

Pacing is a strategy to increase activity without increasing your symptoms. Start by establishing a manageable routine, for example:

At the moment, I can...

| | |
|------------------|---|
| <i>Walk for</i> | <i>minutes</i> |
| <i>Stand for</i> | <i>minutes</i> |
| <i>Lift</i> | <i>kg / lbs from one table to another</i> |

Once you know what you can do, create a plan to increase it.

Begin by doing less than you do at present (say 80%), but do this more frequently through the day. Increase this gradually every few days to improve your activity tolerance.

3. Exercise

Exercising with nerve pain may seem daunting, but it is one of the most important elements of managing nerve root pain. Improving your flexibility, strength and overall level of fitness is important in helping you manage your symptoms.

There is no evidence that one type of exercise is better than another, however, you should enjoy what you are doing.

You may initially find exercises that are low impact more comfortable, such as cycling on an exercise bike or exercises in water.

Use the pacing principles to judge how much exercise you should start with, and to increase your exercise over time. It is better to do a few exercises several times a day rather than all at once.

4. Lifestyle

Lifestyle can significantly impact upon the amount of pain and physical restrictions a nerve pain can cause.

Although it can be difficult to be cheerful or optimistic if you are in pain, it's important to stay positive as this can help you recover faster. Low mood, stress and poor sleep are all known to increase pain by making our nerves more sensitive.

Ensuring that you have a regular sleep pattern, taking steps to reduce stress, such as relaxation and mindfulness can help you to better manage your symptoms.

Carrying excess body weight can increase the pressure on your lower back and contribute to your pain. Even if you have nerve root pain, you can still lose weight in the same way everyone else can: by reducing the calories you consume and increasing exercise.

Create a calorie deficit by cutting empty calories from your diet. Reduce the amount of sugar, processed food, saturated fat, fizzy drinks and alcohol you consume. Replace these foods with lean meats, fruit, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds.

Smoking causes the release of harmful chemicals into our bodies that slows healing and makes nerves more sensitive to pain. Smoking also increases the level of stress hormones, which also increases nerve sensitivity. Visit www.smokefreewestsussex.co.uk to find out more about stopping smoking.

5. Posture

Certain postures can place extra strain on the spine contributing to your symptoms. Taking steps to improve your posture by improving your seating position may help. However in some instances you will need to adopt strange postures to reduce your pain.

Take regular breaks from your desk, driving or any activity where your spine is held in the same position for a long period of time. Often changing your posture may feel awkward at first because your body has become used to sitting and standing in a particular way. Sometimes a supporting pillow seems to help some people.

6. Physiotherapy

Physiotherapists are experts in helping people develop self-management strategies and developing exercise routines for individuals with pain and medical problems.

Individuals with nerve root pain may also find some physiotherapy treatments helpful in reducing their pain in the short-term; however these treatments alone will not give you a longer term cure.

Treatments such as acupuncture, ultrasound and traction have no scientific basis for the treatment of nerve root pain and are no longer routinely offered. Nerve root pain is most effectively managed when you take control.

How can a clinician help?

What about scans?

An MRI scan (magnetic resonance image) may be helpful if pain does not settle or if an intervention like an injection or operation is being considered.

An MRI scan is the gold standard for getting an internal view of the bodies' structure. MRI scans don't involve x-rays and are very safe, although they are quite noisy and some people find them claustrophobic. X-rays only provide limited information about the discs and nerve roots, and are therefore are not routinely arranged.

Do I need a scan?

MRI scans are not normally required in the early stages of a cervical radiculopathy, because it is normal that pain will improve on its own, with time.

MRI scans are very sensitive and will detect almost all serious spine problems such as cancer, infection or pressure on the spinal cord or spinal nerves.

They will also comment on minor abnormalities that are not important, or related to your symptoms. Although these words can sound concerning, they are nothing to worry about.

Should I be concerned?

In **very rare cases** a disc bulge could result in a cluster of symptoms that require requires immediate attention. This is termed myelopathy. Although very rare, it is important to act on these symptoms as an emergency, to avoid permanent symptoms

Myelopathy is the result of compression of the spinal cord in your neck, this could cause:

- Having bilateral pins and needles or numbness in hands or feet
- Loss of dexterity, weakness and control of the arms or legs

If you think you are experiencing any of these symptoms you should seek urgent medical advice.

What if my symptoms do not improve?

If your symptoms don't improve with conservative treatment, or severely restrict your quality of life then you may be referred for spinal injections to alleviate your arm pain, or surgery to reduce pressure on the spinal nerves. Surgery will be advised for those individuals who develop progressive arm weakness.

What does injection or surgery entail?

If your signs and symptoms match up with your imaging findings, then an injection such as a nerve root block can be very helpful for arm pain. Injections are low risk procedures that can be repeated, and benefit about 60% of people with nerve pain in the leg, however they are not particularly helpful for neck pain.

If symptoms remain unacceptable despite trying conservative measures, then surgery can be considered. This will need to take into account your general health and overall fitness.

Surgery is most likely to benefit nerve pain in the arm, however it is not particularly helpful for neck pain. Spinal decompression involves removal of the bone or tissue that is compressing the nerves is removed to give the nerves more room.

Summary: what are the key take home messages?

Cervical radiculopathy usually settles over time and recurrence is rare. Distress and fear often make pain worse.

- Cervical radiculopathy can be very varied and the amount of pain you are in, is NOT related to the size of the disc bulge.
- Stay at work or return back as soon as possible. It will hurt whether or not you are working, and normal activities will not delay recovery.
- Medications and adjustments in lifestyle may help to improve your quality of life while healing occurs.
- Only a very small number of patients who are not settling over the usual time scale will require either injection or surgical interventions.