

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
- Imaging with or without nerve conduction studies

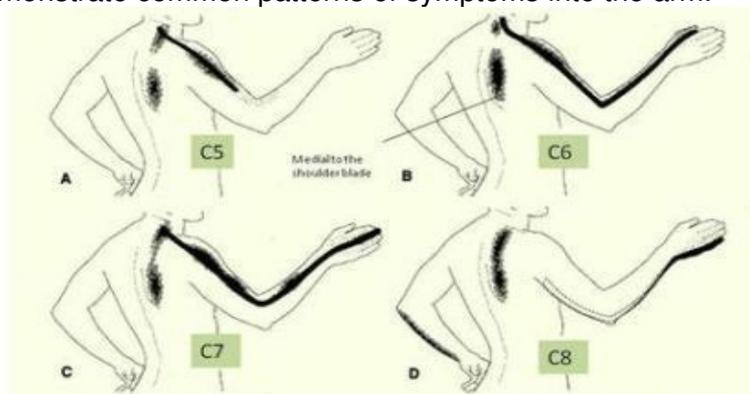
What's wrong with me?

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. Some of these changes may cause irritation or compression of the nerve tissue in your spine.

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 of age related changes on an X-ray and MRI, however few will get pain.

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. They can also advise you of different types of painkillers such as neuropathic pain medication.

2. 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.

Exercise in a way that is tolerable for you and your symptoms.

3. 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.

What if my symptoms do not improve?

Most people's symptoms will settle within 3-6 months, however in some cases further intervention may be needed such as steroid injections or surgery.

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 further intervention such as injection or surgical interventions.