

Spinal Stenosis

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

What is Spinal Stenosis?

Spinal stenosis refers to pain in the lower back (lumbar spine) and legs which starts after a few minutes' walking, and tends to get better very quickly when you sit down.

It is the narrowing of the spinal canal. In many cases this is completely symptom free, but can cause symptoms ranging from pain, to pins and needles, numbness and muscle weakness.

How is Spinal Stenosis diagnosed?

Spinal stenosis is diagnosed from the signs and symptoms you describe. If surgery is being considered then you may undergo an MRI scan (magnetic resonance imaging) to assess the degree of stenosis and help plan your treatment. There is a poor association between pain severity, level of restriction and extent of stenosis seen on an MRI scan. Symptoms can vary considerably from person to person, it is not uncommon that individuals with a severe stenosis experience few symptoms.

What's wrong with me?

As you get older, the tissues in your spine change in response to the stresses and strains of normal everyday life. There is a constant process of "wear and repair" that occurs within our joints, which helps them to adapt to the stresses and strains of normal everyday life. Some of these changes may cause irritation or compression of the nerve tissue in your spine.

These changes can occur over many years like wrinkles on our skin. For most people, these changes do not cause any symptoms. Up to 80% of people over the age of 60 will have visible signs of age related changes on an X-ray or an MRI, however few will get pain.

How can this affect me?

Stenosis can affect any part of your spine, and symptoms can occur in the leg or arms depending on the part of the spine that is affected.

What are the main symptoms of Spinal Stenosis?

The symptoms most commonly experienced with spinal stenosis include back pain, buttock and leg pain. You may also experience numbness, weakness or feelings of unsteadiness, which can affect both legs.

Symptoms typically occur with activities such as standing for long periods and walking. This is because these activities cause the spinal canal to narrow. Leg pain caused by walking is called claudication.

Many people say they can walk further if they are able to lean forwards, for example on a shopping trolley. Pain usually gets better with sitting and leaning forwards, this widens the spinal canal giving the nerves more space.

How long will it take to get better?

Research suggests approximately 15% of people with spinal stenosis will improve with time, 70% will stay the same. 15% will experience a worsening of symptoms (usually walking); however this happens slowly with time.

What I can do to help myself get better?

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

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

While it is common that people with back pain will look for someone to get rid of their pain, it is more effective to find a strategy that allows you to be in control and manage your symptoms.

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 spinal stenosis, or if symptoms are not severe as pain will often 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** spinal stenosis could result in a cluster of symptoms that require requires immediate attention. This is termed cauda equina syndrome. Although very rare, it is important to act on these symptoms as an emergency, to avoid permanent symptoms

Cauda equina syndrome is the result of compression of the nerves in the base of your spine that supply the muscles and sensation to your bladder, bowel, genital area and legs, this could cause:

- Loss of feeling or pins and needles between your legs, around your genitals or back passage
- Changes to bladder and bowel function, such as loss of sensation, loss of control or an inability to empty your bladder
- Sexual problems such as loss of vaginal sensation and inability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Weakness in the legs affecting walking

If you think you are experiencing any of these symptoms you should attend your nearest A&E department.

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 leg weakness, or bowel and bladder problems.

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 arm or leg, however they are not particularly helpful for neck or back 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 or leg, however it is not particularly helpful for neck or back 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?

- Stenosis is not serious, and can be effectively managed without surgery
- It may take several months to see improvements
- Good days and bad days are normal
- Remain as active and undertake exercise to improve your fitness
- Painkillers with exercise are more effective than on their own
- Use pacing strategies, rest and walking aids to increase your function
- Although activity maybe painful, you are not harming your back