

Spinal Stenosis

Introduction

We hope this leaflet will help you understand more about the problems you have with your leg pain and provide some advice on how you can manage this. It is not a substitute for professional healthcare advice and should be used along with information you may be given by your GP or health practitioner.

What do we mean by the term 'spinal stenosis'?

Your spine is made up of many segments of bone (vertebrae) with discs between the vertebrae. Behind the bony segments there is a canal. This canal contains your spinal nerves. Between each bone there are two holes (called foramina) one on the right side, one on the left side. In the lower back, these nerves pass into the legs to supply the muscles in the legs and provide feeling to the legs. Stenosis means narrowing of the canal (canal stenosis) and / or the sides holes where the nerves exit (foraminal stenosis).

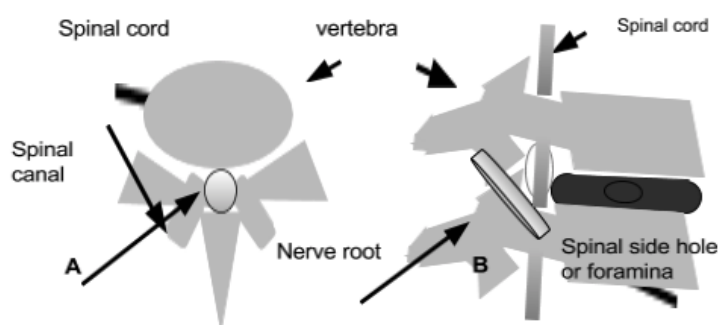
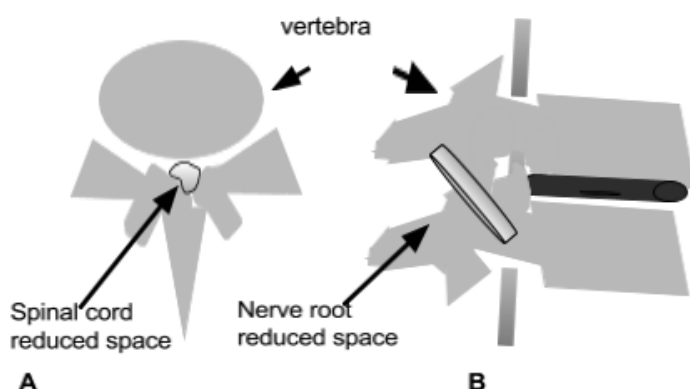


Figure 1 Normal spinal canal viewed from A) above B) from the side.

Normal spinal canal viewed from A) above B) from the side.

In some people, part of the spinal canal or side holes (foramina) get narrower as they get older leaving less room for the nerves.

Spinal canal with stenosis viewed from A) above B) the side.



Symptoms

Most people with spinal stenosis have difficulty walking or standing for any length of time. This is because standing straight narrows the spinal canal which then narrows the space for the spinal nerves causing pain and/or cramp in the bottom or legs. Other related symptoms may include leg numbness and/or pins and needles.

People with spinal stenosis often find that if they sit or bend forward the pain or sensations ease off. They also report that they walk better and further if they lean forwards; for example, pushing a trolley when shopping. Others report that they can cycle without pain, yet are unable to walk 50 metres. This is because when we bend forward the spinal canal becomes wider which gives the nerves more space.

What can I do to help the pain?

Many people use medication to help them remain active and to cope with their pain and symptoms. It is recommended that you take your medication regularly. It is best to get advice from a GP or pharmacist. Many people find that a walking aid helps them walk longer. A physiotherapist can assess you regarding the best type of walking aid.

What about exercise?

Exercises which bend the spine forward may help if your pain is not too severe.

All exercises should be relatively comfortable to do. If you have pain on a specific exercise that does not settle quickly, you should stop that exercise.

Step 1: Lying on your back bring both hips and knees up towards the chest using your hands for assistance

Step 2: Start in sitting at the edge of chair. Slowly slide hands down inner aspect of calves towards the floor and then slowly return to the upright sitting position.

Step 3: Lying on your back with your knees bent tilt your pelvis back to flatten the small of your back against the floor. Positions which might help ease your symptoms are shown below.

Step 4: Stand leaning forwards onto a table or worktop.

Step 5: Stand with your foot of your painful leg on a low stool or step

Step 6: Sit on a chair, leaning forwards with your arms on your knees.

Is spinal stenosis serious?

Spinal stenosis can be very painful. It is not usually serious. However, if you have any of the symptoms mentioned below it is best to get them checked out by a medical practitioner.

These symptoms are rare, but need urgent medical attention.

- Difficulty passing water (retention).
- Loss of bladder control.
- Loss of bowel control.
- Weak muscles in your legs.
- Numbness between your legs (back passage or genitals).

If you suddenly develop any of the above symptoms then it is strongly recommended that you contact your GP or the Accident and Emergency Department as an emergency.

Do I need any special tests?

The main way we diagnose spinal stenosis is by listening to you and completing a physical examination and assessment. Your healthcare professional will discuss the requirement for any further specialist tests with you as required.

What is the future?

In most cases of spinal stenosis, the symptoms remain unchanged with little or no variation over the years. Some people find their condition gets worse and over time the distance they can walk gets less and less.

Would an operation help?

Occasionally people with spinal stenosis may require surgery. You can speak to a healthcare professional about this.

Should I be off work?

It is usually recommended that you try to stay at work or get back to work as soon as possible. You do not need to be fully pain and symptom free to return to work. Research shows the longer you are off work the less likely it is that you return.

Try to stay positive. There is a lot you can do to help yourself. Most symptoms do settle with time.

Useful Information

www.nhsinform.co.uk