

Orthopaedic Connection

Herniated Disc

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

You no doubt have heard people say they have a "slipped" or "ruptured" or "bulging" disc in the back. What they are actually describing is medically termed herniated disc. The first three words are so commonly used that we might as well accept them. Doctors even use slipped, ruptured or bulging disc when speaking to patients. All three words and herniated disc mean the same thing. Fact: That they all mean the same thing is important to know so as not to be confused.

What is a Disc?

A disc is a shock absorber between two spinal vertebrae. The structure is really two things. The outer edge of the disc is a ring of gristle-like cartilage called the annulus. The center of the disc is a gel substance called the nucleus. A disc is kind of like a jelly donut where the dough part is the annulus and the jelly is the nucleus.

Function of the disc

The discs between the vertebrae allow the back to flex or bend. Discs also act as shock absorbers for the spine. Several inches of your height is due to the thickness of the discs.

Discs have a high water content. As people age, the water content decreases so the disc begins to shrink and the disc spaces between the vertebrae get narrower. As this happens, you actually do get shorter. The disc becomes less flexible.

Conditions that weaken the disc

- wear and tear
- excessive weight which can cause the softer material of the nucleus to squeeze out
- bad posture
- improper lifting
- sudden pressure

The fibrous outer ring may tear allowing the jelly nucleus to move out or herniate from its central space in the disc.

Pinched Nerve

This is another term we will always have with us. As the disc material herniates outward it puts pressure on nearby nerve roots in effect pinching the nerve with resultant pain we call sciatica. Rarely a fragment of the disc will break loose and enter the spinal canal causing nerve pressure. This condition is termed extruded disc.

Recognizing Symptoms

Lower back pain itself is not a sign of herniated disc. Four out of five of us have it!

The most common symptom of herniated disc is sciatica - shooting pain that goes from the buttocks down the back of one leg to the calf or foot. This is caused by disc pressure on a spinal nerve.

Other symptoms are

- Weakness in one leg
- Tingling or numbness in one leg
- Burning pain centered in the back
- Loss of bowel or bladder control combined with any of the above can be extremely serious and must be treated at once!

Diagnosis

Medical history is key to a correct diagnosis. You may have a history of back pain with gradually increasing leg pain. Sometimes a specific injury causes a disc to herniate.

A good physical exam can determine which nerve root is affected and how seriously. Plain x-rays are needed to determine the presence of degeneration or arthritis of the spine. MRI is usually required to confirm my diagnosis of a herniated disc.

Next Week

Herniated disc is a complicated subject. I haven't even touched on treatment yet.

If you will rejoin us next week I will cover all the aspects of treatment.

Factoid: The most dangerous high school sports for boys are football and wrestling. For girls it's basketball. The knee is the most often injured area, followed by the ankle, then the shoulder.

Check out our office website www.orthopodsurgeon.com, which takes you to Your Orthopaedic Connection. It has answers to most of your questions about Orthopaedic and musculoskeletal things.

See you next week.

Our goal is simple - TO help people return to more pain free,
functional lives. I specialize in you.

Good health. Good life. All the best to you.

Be well.

Dr. Haverbush