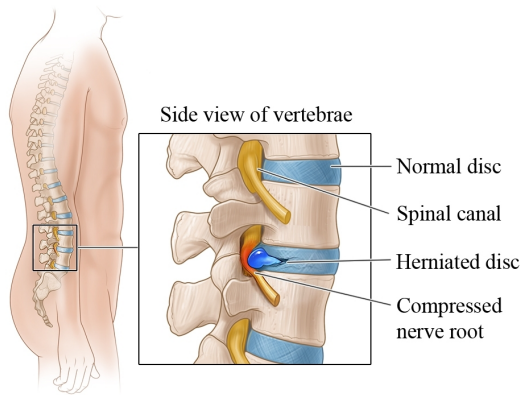


Herniated Disc



The bones that form the spine in your back are called vertebrae. These bones are cushioned by discs. If a disc is damaged, it may bulge or break open. This is called a herniated disc. This can happen from normal wear and tear as we age. It can also be caused by an injury or disease.

Many people have herniated discs but have no pain or other symptoms. If the herniated disc presses on a nerve, it can cause back pain or pain, numbness, and weakness in your leg. You may have all of these symptoms.

You may be able to recover from your herniated disc with a few weeks or months of rest, medicine, and exercises. Most people do. In some cases, you may need surgery.

Who gets a herniated disc?

Herniated discs can occur in people of all ages. They are most common in middle-aged people.

Herniated discs are common in people who sit at desks or drive for long periods of time.

What causes a herniated disc?

A herniated disc usually is caused by wear and tear. As we age, our discs lose some of the fluid that keeps them flexible. A herniated disc also may result from an injury to the spine, which may cause tiny tears or cracks on the outside of the disc. The jellylike material inside the disc may be forced out through the cracks. That causes the disc to bulge or break open.

What are the symptoms of a herniated disc?

Many people with herniated discs have no symptoms. Pain happens when the bulging disc irritates the membrane on the outside of the spinal cord or spinal nerves. If the disc presses on the nerve roots in the spine, it can cause weakness or numbness in the area of the body where that nerve travels.

For example, a herniated disc that presses on one of the nerve roots of the sciatic nerve—a large nerve that extends from the lower back down the back of the leg—may cause pain and numbness in the leg, a condition called sciatica. Sciatica is pronounced "sy-AT-ih-kuh." It is the most common symptom of a herniated disc in the lower back.

How is a herniated disc treated?

Often the disc heals on its own. The herniated disc material breaks down and is absorbed. Treatment other than surgery is usually recommended first.

About half the people with herniated discs recover within 1 month.

After 6 months, most people recover. Only a few people have enough pain to consider surgery.

Treatment other than surgery

The goal of treatment is to help you return to your daily activities. This treatment usually includes the following.

Education. Learn how to take care of your back, which may include training in pain and symptom control. You can learn how to do physical therapy using exercise or heat. And you can learn exercises to do at home to strengthen the muscles that support your lower back.

Rest. Your doctor may recommend a short period of rest or reduced activity followed by a gradual increase in activity.

Pain relief. Some people can deal with pain without medicine if they know there is a good chance it will go away on its own. Other people use medicine to control pain. Medicine options include pain relievers, muscle relaxants, and antidepressants. Doctors can also give corticosteroids as an injection into the spinal canal (epidural) to help relieve pain.

Exercise. Keep active and use exercises to help yourself return to your usual level of activity. Follow the recommendations of your doctor or physical therapist.

Treatment with surgery

Surgery is eventually considered for some people who have a herniated disc. It can be the right treatment for people who have progressive nerve damage or severe weakness

or numbness, or for those whose pain has not improved after several weeks of other treatment.

The most common surgery for herniated disc is discectomy. The doctor removes the disc material through an incision. Many people are able to go back to work and daily activities quickly. In some cases, your doctor may recommend physical therapy and home exercises after your surgery.

When is a herniated disc an emergency?

Call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You lose bladder or bowel control.
- You suddenly cannot walk or stand.
- You have sudden numbness or weakness in both legs.

Call your doctor now, or seek immediate medical care if:

- You have new pain, numbness, tingling, or weakness.
- Your pain is very severe and is getting worse.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if:

- You do not get better as expected.
- You have any new symptoms.
- You have any problems with your medicine.
- You have questions or concerns.