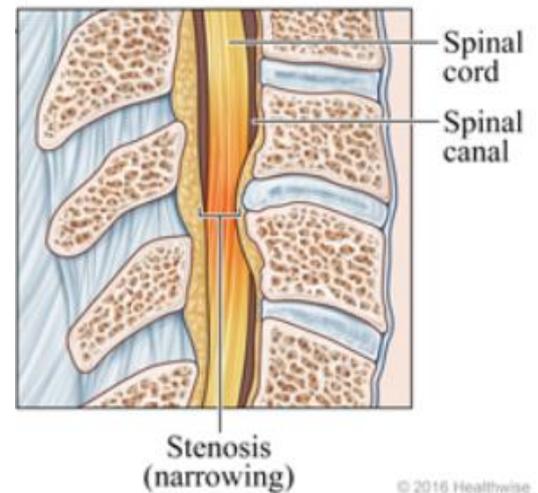


Self-help for Spinal Stenosis

Information for patients

What is spinal stenosis?

Spinal stenosis is a common condition affecting the lower back. It affects people over the age of 60 years. Spinal stenosis can result in symptoms including back pain, buttock pain and leg pain. Other symptoms include pins and needles, numbness and sometimes weakness in the legs or feet. If you have spinal stenosis you will likely experience a combination of these symptoms.



What causes spinal stenosis?

The spinal cord runs through a tunnel made from the bones in your back called vertebrae. This is because the bones are strong and act to protect the spinal cord. The nerves then branch out from the spinal cord and pass through smaller tunnels at the side of your spine. Sometimes the aging process leads to narrowing in parts of the lower back. This usually occurs gradually over time.

The nerves and spinal cord may become tightened or squeezed as a result of this narrowing. Stenosis is the medical term for narrowing. Narrowing in the spine is very common but not everyone who has it will develop symptoms.

Spinal stenosis can also occur at different levels in the spine. It is possible to get similar symptoms in your legs and feet that are not caused by spinal stenosis.

Will spinal stenosis get better?

It is not possible to reverse any age-related changes in the back; however it is possible to manage and improve your symptoms. Many people will experience “flare-ups” so it is important that you are confident in ways to manage your symptoms.

How can I treat my symptoms?

Pain medication - You can speak to your GP or Pharmacist if you are unsure about what medication to use to help reduce your pain. Simple pain-relieving medication can help. It is important that you take your medication regularly, as prescribed and do not just wait for your symptoms to increase. You may be prescribed medication specifically for nerve pain.

Pacing – Spinal stenosis is commonly aggravated by standing and walking for a long-time. It is commonly relieved by bending, for example in positions such as sitting down or leaning over. This is because the spine opens in a bent position creating more space for the spinal cord and nerves. You may need to pace your walking and standing by doing little and often. For example, if you have to take a long walk you might take a few rests in sitting so it is more manageable.

Exercise – If you have spinal stenosis it is important that you keep your back moving. If you become too inactive, your joints can get stiff and muscles can weaken – this can make your pain worse. Keeping up regular general exercise is important to manage pain and help to prevent flare-ups in the long term.

It is also important not to overdo it by doing activities that make any symptoms in your legs worse. It is not dangerous to do such activities but this may delay your recovery.

Some specific exercises for lumbar spinal stenosis

Shown below are some exercises that can help to relieve stiffness and pain in your back and legs. Aim to do these at least once a day and try to repeat up to 10 times or as your pain allows, little and often.



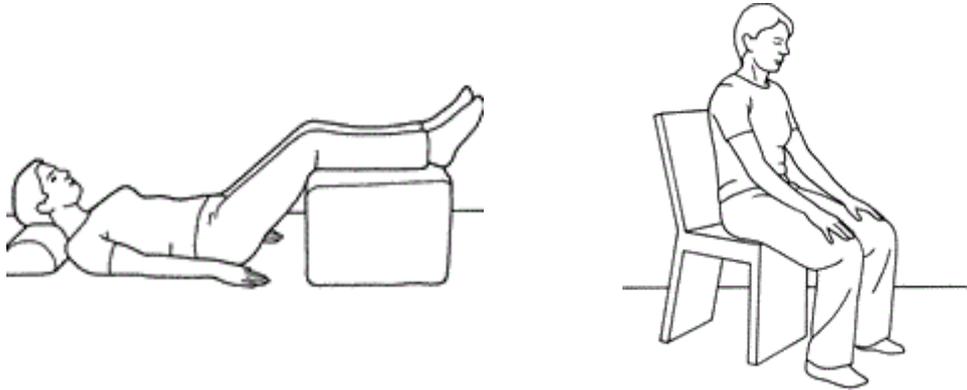
While sitting on a chair with your legs apart, bend forwards towards the floor rounding the lower back as much as you can. You may wish to rest your hands on your legs if you are unable to reach the floor. Hold the stretch for 30 seconds to a minute.



Lying down on the bed or floor, bend one knee in towards your chest gently drawing it in with both arms. Straighten the other leg as much as you can. Hold the stretch for 30 seconds to a minute. Repeat on both sides.

What else can I do to help my pain?

Resting positions - Slumped or reclined sitting will usually help to relieve your symptoms. Short periods of time in these positions may help you to manage your symptoms. Remember it is important to keep moving and changing position.



Physiotherapy – You may self-refer to a Physiotherapist who can advise you on treatment to help your symptoms. This will include exercises. You don't need an appointment with your GP to complete a self-referral form. You can usually pick up a form at your GP surgery.

Things to consider

- It is important that you see your Physiotherapist or GP if you develop new or worsening symptoms of pins and needles or numbness in your legs or feet or weakness in your lower limbs
- Keep active and moving in order to keep up a good general fitness level
- Staying at work and keeping up your usual hobbies is important for your overall well-being
- Bed rest is no longer recommended for back pain - it can be detrimental and cause symptoms to worsen in the long run
- Use your medication as prescribed to manage your pain effectively
- Your GP or Physiotherapist can diagnose spinal stenosis based on your symptoms and examination
- Not everyone who has spinal stenosis will require medical interventions or imaging such as scans or X-rays

When to seek urgent medical help

These symptoms are rare but if you have a sudden onset of any of the following, please seek urgent medical advice:

- Numbness around your back passage or genitals
- Weakness in your legs that makes you unsteady on your feet
- Difficulty controlling or passing urine
- Loss of control of your bowels

This information is available in audio, Braille, large print and other languages. To request a copy, please ask a member of staff.

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