

# Cervical Spinal Stenosis

Neck and back pain. Balance issues. Numbness. Is it just getting older? Or is it something more serious?

If it is cervical spinal stenosis, it could be fairly serious, depending on the severity.

## What is Cervical Spinal Stenosis?

The vertebrae are the bones of the spinal column; housed inside the spinal column is the spinal canal, which contains the spinal cord. The spinal cord is a grouping of various nerves that runs the length of the spinal column.

The spinal cord has a lot of responsibility in our bodies—to put it very simply, the spinal cord is responsible for our sensations. Without a functioning spinal cord, we wouldn't be able to touch, move, feel.

Cervical spinal stenosis occurs when the spinal canal has narrowed, causing compression of the spinal cord. Sometimes the canal has narrowed so much that the cord can become damaged. According to University of Michigan, “Squeezing the nerves and cord in the cervical spine can change how the spinal cord functions and cause pain, stiffness, numbness, or weakness in the neck, arms, and legs. It can also affect your control of your bowels and bladder.”

## Prevention of Cervical Spinal Stenosis

Cervical spinal stenosis is generally an age-related change. This means as we age, the aging process can cause changes in the body, thus contributing to the development of cervical spinal stenosis. On a rare occasion, cervical spinal stenosis can occur at birth due to the formation of bones.

In general, the experts at Johns Hopkins state that cervical spinal stenosis is likely not preventable. However, there are things that can potentially reduce the risk of developing it. These things include:

- Staying active. An exercise plan that is tailored to your individual needs can increase endurance and maintain spinal stability.
- Stretch. Stretching keeps the body flexible. Relaxation exercises can also help reduce pain.
- Improve posture. Poor posture can wreak havoc on the spine as it can cause wear on the spine, actually increasing the risk of spinal stenosis.
- Lose weight. Being overweight puts pressure on the spine. Carrying extra pounds can also make it more difficult to exercise with proper form, which can also contribute to spinal stenosis.
- Quit smoking. As if you need another reason to quit – smoking reduces blood flow to the nerves



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that ‘feed’ the spine, meaning that degenerative changes are likely to occur.

## Pain Management Options

Symptoms of cervical spinal stenosis typically include:

- Stiffness, weakness, pain, and numbness of the neck, shoulders, arms, hands, and legs
- Balance and coordination problems
- Incontinence

As we discussed, cervical spinal stenosis is an age-related change. As such, if minor, many people may have no symptoms. Symptoms begin to develop when the nerves begin to be squeezed.

Treatment of cervical spinal stenosis depends on the severity. Minor cases may be treated with pain medications, exercises to increase the strength and flexibility of the affected areas, and physical therapy. However, severe cervical spinal stenosis may require a decompressive surgery is performed in order to relieve pressure in the spine. According to the University of Michigan, a decompressive surgery “...involves removing some of the disc, bone, and/or tissue that may be pressing on the nerve roots. Vertebrae are often joined together surgically (fused) to provide stability to the spine.”

When pain is an issue, specific medication treatment options include:

- Aspirin
- Acetaminophen
- Ibuprofen
- Naproxen
- Muscle relaxants
- Anti-seizure medications

Aspirin, acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and naproxen are all available over-the-counter and provide short-term relief. Muscle relaxants and anti-seizure medications are helpful when treating muscle spasms and long term damage.

Long-term options to treat pain include:

- Corticosteroid injections. Corticosteroid is a steroid that is injected into the affected area that reduces inflammation. However, they are used sparingly due to side effects. They often work for several months, and are repeated after a duration if prescribed by a physician.
- Anesthetics. A nerve block can also be injected into the affected area to reduce pain.

## Prognosis of Cervical Spinal Stenosis

For many people, cervical spinal stenosis is minor as it can simply be an age-related change in the body. But for many people, cervical spinal stenosis can cause potentially serious complications if left untreated.

We've discussed the symptoms of cervical spinal stenosis, These symptoms can get progressively worse as the blood flow is impeded to the nerves of the spinal cord. Eventually, permanent incontinence can occur, as well as long-term balance problems and even paralysis.

## The Bottom Line

Generally, cervical spinal stenosis is an easily treatable medical condition. However, any concerning symptoms should be reported to a physician immediately so as to receive proper medical treatment. ■

## Resources

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