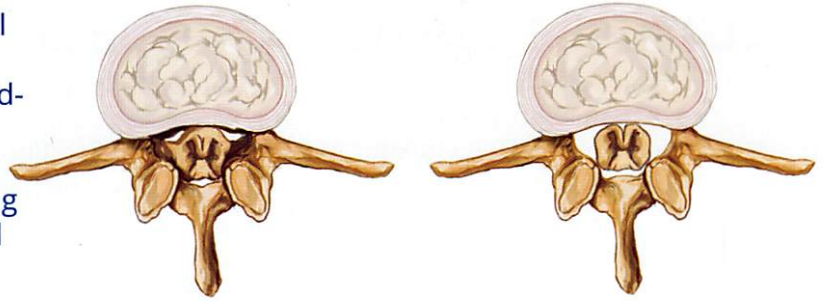


What is lumbar spinal stenosis?

Your spinal canal is a tunnel through your vertebrae containing the largest and most critical nerves in the entire body, the spinal cord and spinal nerves. Spinal stenosis is like the lime build-up on the inside of a garden hose. Over time, it narrows the diameter of the hose, just as spinal stenosis narrows the spinal canal. This narrowing pinches these vital structures in some cases, and can cause significant symptoms.



Stenosis

Normal

What are the symptoms?

Spinal stenosis itself does not always cause symptoms. Many people can have significant stenosis on imaging studies but fail to have symptoms.

When present, symptoms may include pain, cramping, or numbness in the back and/or legs. Weakness may occur. Rarely, bowel and/or bladder problems can occur.

Symptoms are often worse with prolonged standing or walking. Symptoms may come and go, and may vary in severity when present. Bending forward or sitting increases the room in the spinal canal and may lead to reduced pain or completed relief from pain.

How is it diagnosed?

Your physician will take a history and perform a physical examination. X-ray images may reveal evidence of narrowed discs and/or thickened facet joints. A magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) study may be obtained for a more detailed evaluation of spinal structures. Or, a computed axial tomography (CAT) scan and/or a lumbar myelogram may be advised for similar improved detail. Each of these studies can provide information about the presence, location and extent of spinal canal narrowing and nerve root pressure.

Please visit knowyourback.org for more information on spinal stenosis, treatment options and other spine-related topics.

What treatments are available?

Your doctor will usually try nonsurgical treatments at first. These treatments may include anti-inflammatory medications (orally or by injection) to reduce associated swelling or analgesic drugs to control pain. Physical therapy may be prescribed with goals of improving your strength, endurance and flexibility so that you can maintain or resume a more normal lifestyle. Spinal injections (such as an epidural injection of cortisone) may be prescribed.

Surgery is reserved for that small percentage of patients whose pain cannot be relieved by nonsurgical treatment methods. Surgery will also be advised for those individuals who develop progressive leg weakness, or bowel and bladder problems. Because spinal stenosis is a narrowing of the bony canal, the goal of the surgery is to open up the bony canal to improve available space for the nerves. This is called lumbar decompression surgery, or laminectomy.