

Spinal Stenosis

- ◆ Spinal stenosis is a narrowing of either the central spinal canal or the side root canals, also called the foramina.
- ◆ Back pain and leg pain, weakness and cramps are made worse by walking and standing, and may be relieved by bending forwards.
- ◆ Postural treatment, epidural injection, or surgery may be necessary.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms can appear either slowly (usually a sign of wear and tear) or suddenly (perhaps following an accidental injury). Many people with this condition will report low backache, buttock and leg pain, sometimes with pins and needles, numbness, weakness and cramping sensations.

The symptoms are often worse with exercise, making standing and walking gradually more limited.

People often report that leaning forward relieves their symptoms.

How does it happen?

Thickening of the surrounding bone and soft tissue due to normal “wear and tear” can narrow either kind of canal. This can occur on top of naturally narrow canals, which some people have to start with. This narrowing then causes pressure on the nerves contained in the canal.

Conditions that can cause the narrowing (stenosis) are

- ◆ Congenital or developmental problems
- ◆ Accidental injury
- ◆ Wear and tear changes to the edges of bones of the spine
- ◆ Discs bulging into the canal and prolapses
- ◆ Diseases such as Paget’s disease and Ankylosing Spondylitis
- ◆ A complication following spinal surgery

Exercise and movement can prevent spinal stenosis.

What treatments are there?

A specialist referral to a neuro-surgical consultant for a thorough physical and neurological examination should be organised and imaging techniques such as MRI or CT scans may be ordered. Treatment depends on what is causing the pressure on the nerve.

Options include:

- ◆ “Conservative management” which would involve painkillers, specific exercises and advice on posture (often given by a physiotherapist).

- ◆ Referral to a pain clinic, where treatment might include an epidural injection.
- ◆ Surgical procedure to decompress the nerves and stabilise the spine. This may be decided upon after appropriate investigation and consultation between patient and surgeon.
- ◆ Below is a list of questions, which you may like to use if you reach the point when surgery becomes an option. Please add your own questions and concerns to the list so that you do not forget to discuss them with your surgeon.

Questions to ask your surgeon:

- ◆ Which area of the spine is affected by stenosis? Is it in the spinal canal or side root canals?
- ◆ What has caused this problem in my spine?
- ◆ Do I have signs of spinal cord or nerve root compression?
- ◆ To what are my symptoms due?
- ◆ What are my chances of good pain relief if I opt for surgery?
- ◆ What could I try other than conventional surgery?
- ◆ What is the name of the operation you could do on my back?
- ◆ How many of these do you perform in one year?
- ◆ What are the main risks in this type of operation?
- ◆ How long will I be in hospital?
- ◆ What follow-up physiotherapy should I receive?
- ◆ Can I have written patient guidelines to follow after the operation?
- ◆ When will I get back to normal activities such as working, driving, carrying loads, sporting activities, having sex?

Relevant Information

- ◆ BackCare Factsheets - Back Surgery, Drugs for Back Pain Relief, Epidurals & Back Pain, Physical Activity/Exercise
- ◆ BackCare Booklets - Should I have spinal surgery? and Managing Back Pain
- ◆ Other Publications - "The Back Book" – from the Stationery Office, www.tso.co.uk .