

Back TO Life

Lumbar Spinal Stenosis

by Peter F. Ullrich, Jr., MD

Facet joints tend to get larger as they degenerate. This process is the body's attempt to decrease the stress per unit area across a degenerated joint. Unfortunately, as the joint enlarges, it can place pressure on the nerves as they exit the spine. Standing upright further decreases the space available for the nerve roots and can block the outflow of blood from around the nerve. Congested blood then irritates the nerve and the pain travels into the legs.

Generally, patients with spinal stenosis are comfortable if they are sitting, but have more pain down their legs when they walk, and the pain increases with more walking. Walking while leaning over a supporting object (such as a walker or shopping cart) can help ease the pain, and sitting down will cause the pain to recede.

Options for conservative treatment for spinal stenosis include activity modification, epidural injections and chiropractic care.

- **Activity modification.** Since patients are more comfortable when they are flexed forward, they can concentrate their activity in that position. Exercise can include stationary biking and using a cane or walker for walking while flexed forward.
- **Epidurals.** Approximately 50% of patients will experience good relief after an epidural injection, although the results tend to be temporary. If the injection is helpful it can be done up to three times annually. The action of the injection is not clearly known, but is probably a combination of the anti-inflammatory effect of the steroid and a flushing effect due to injecting a volume of fluid.
- **Chiropractic care.** Chiropractic care can also provide relief, at least temporarily.

Spine surgery (an open decompression) is the only way to change the anatomy of the spine and give the nerves more room. Decompressing the nerves by removing a portion of the the enlarged facet joint prevents the nerve pinching when the patient stands up. It is effective in approximately 80% of cases, although over a 5-year period of time the results tend to deteriorate. Part of this deterioration is due to the progressive nature of osteoarthritis, and part is due to the overall aging process.

It should be noted that lumbar spinal stenosis rarely causes nerve damage, and surgery is almost always elective. The results seem to be as good if the surgery is done early or delayed, even for years.

Back to Life was developed specifically for chiropractors, worker's compensation case managers, physical therapists, occupational therapists, athletic trainers and personal trainers to provide a better understanding of **NeuroSpine's integrated modality approach** to back pain.

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