

Cervical Disc Herniation

What is it?

A cervical disc is made of a fibrous outer ring filled with a gel-like material. The discs are found between your vertebrae (spine bones) and function like shock absorbers in the spine. Cervical disc herniation is when the gel-like material bulges or pushes through a tear in the outer ring of your disc. The disc material may then press on your nerves or spinal cord (See Figures 1, 2, & 3).

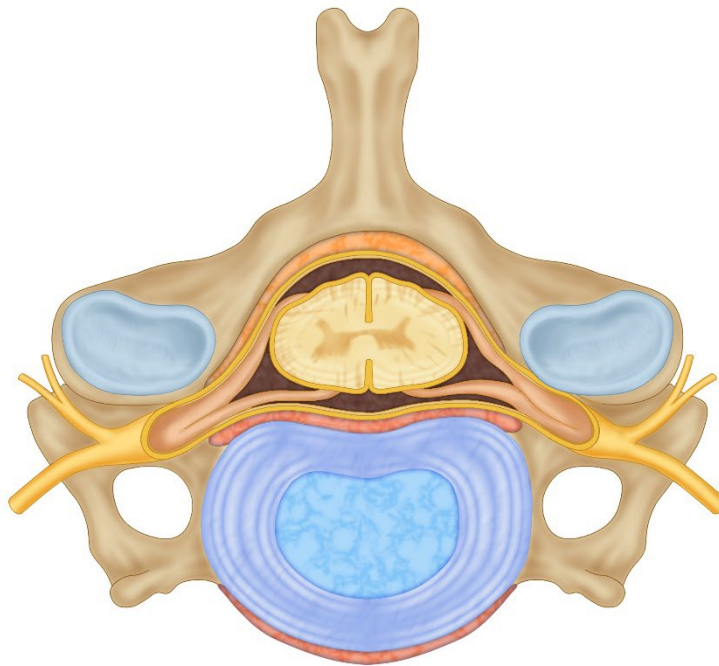


Figure 1- Normal cervical disc as viewed from top

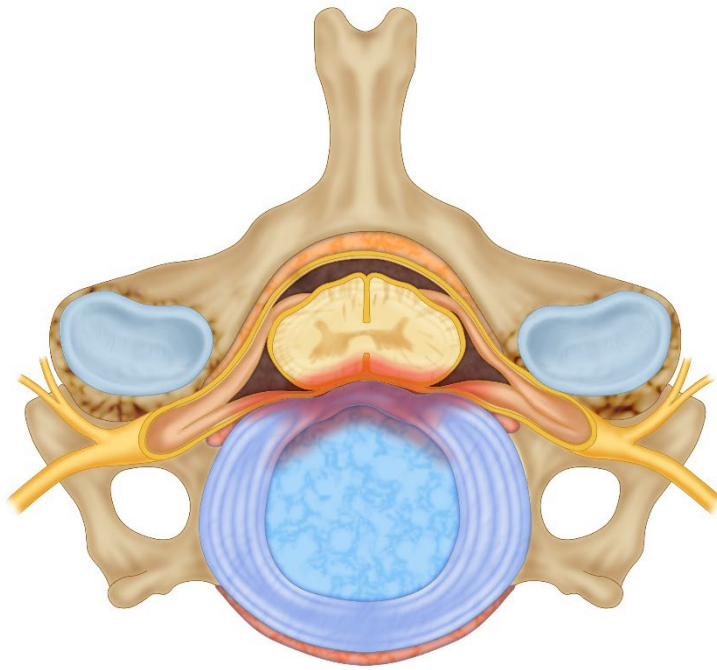


Figure 2- Central disc herniation as viewed from top

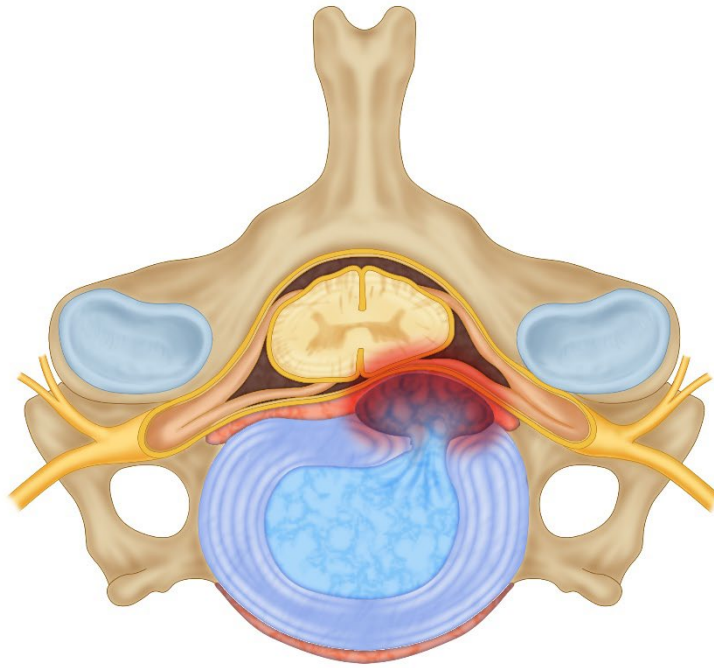


Figure 3-Lateral disc herniation as viewed from top

What causes it?

There are multiple causes of disc herniation. In most cases, there is already some wear and tear of the disc related to activity over a lifetime. At this point, the disc may herniate due to continued wear and tear. The herniation can also be caused by a simple action like sneezing/coughing, sudden movements, strenuous activity, or trauma (like a fall or car accident). Disc degeneration and herniation may also be related to smoking or the way your body was made (genetics).

What are the signs and symptoms?

Disc herniation often causes neck pain. When herniated disc material presses on the nerves in the neck, one may experience arm/shoulder pain, abnormal sensations, numbness, and weakness. This is also true if the herniated disc material presses on the spinal cord, but one may also see coordination problems, balance problems, and issues with bladder and bowel function.

How is it diagnosed?

Cervical disc herniations are identified by physical exam and appropriate imaging studies. Imaging studies may include Xrays, MRI, or CT scan. Your doctor will use all this information to make the diagnosis.

How is it treated?

Typically, a new cervical disc herniation will resolve in 6-12 weeks without aggressive treatment. Symptoms are managed with over the counter medicines like Ibuprofen, Tylenol and/or muscle relaxers. You may also try physical therapy to strengthen and stretch your neck muscles. If symptoms fail to improve, a mixture of steroids and numbing medicine may be injected into the space around your spinal cord and nerve roots to ease pain. These injections can also help us diagnose the exact source of your discomfort.

If you have no improvement in your symptoms for 6 weeks with NONSURGICAL care, we can discuss surgical options. The surgeries for cervical disc herniation are dependent on your symptoms, physical exam, imaging studies, and response to steroid injections if performed. This may include **artificial disc replacement**, **anterior cervical discectomy and fusion**, or **foraminotomy**. Your surgeon and healthcare team will help decide what treatment is right for you.