

Cervical Spinal Stenosis

What is it?

Spinal stenosis is a narrowing of the space available for the spinal cord and nerves. In the neck, your spinal canal holds your spinal cord. Your spinal cord controls your ability to move. When your spinal canal narrows, it may put pressure on your spinal cord (stenosis). See Figures 1 and 2.

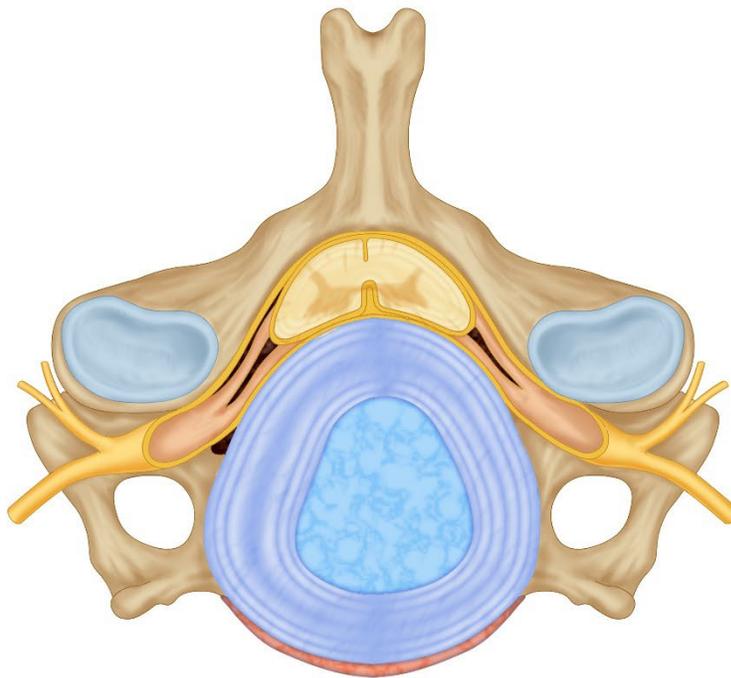


Figure 1 – top view of spinal cord being compressed by central disc bulge

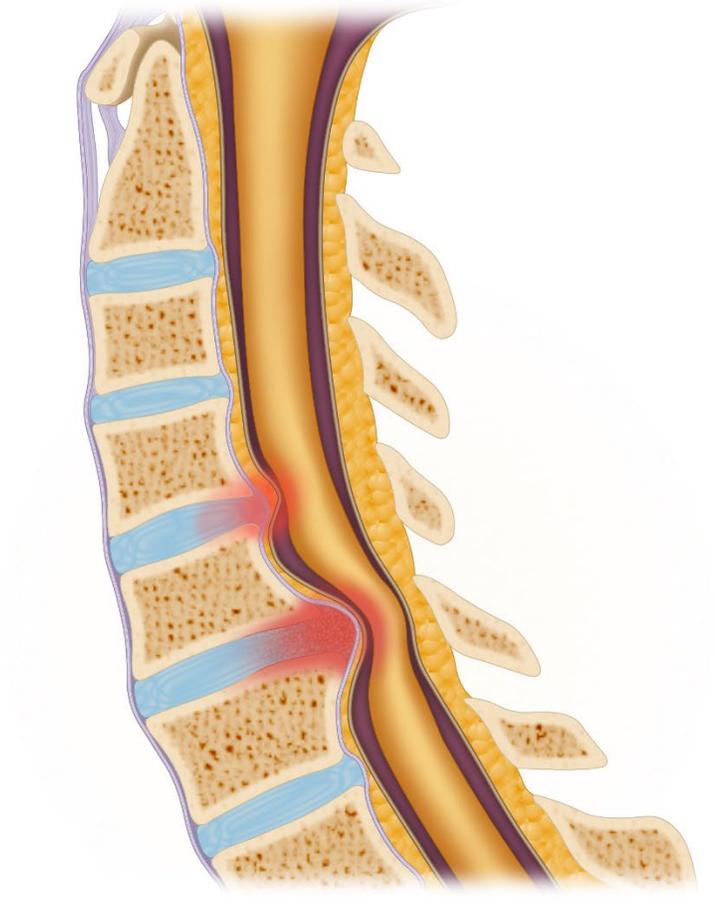


Figure 2 – side view of spinal cord being compressed by disc bulge/herniation

What causes it?

Cervical spinal stenosis can be caused by many things. The most common cause is natural wear and tear in the neck from aging that causes bulging discs and thickening of the ligaments around the spinal cord. Cervical spinal stenosis may also be caused by trauma, tumor, and infection, but these are far less common. Finally, some people are born with a narrow spinal canal that does not provide enough room for the nerve structures.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Cervical spinal stenosis occurs when the space around your spinal cord and nerves narrows. When your spinal canal narrows, it may put pressure on your spinal cord or nerves (stenosis). Cervical spinal stenosis can cause neck pain with decreased range of motion. People may also complain of numbness (loss of feeling), pain, and/or tingling in your neck, arms, and legs. Other symptoms include trouble with balance, walking and hand coordination or strength (see “***Cervical Myelopathy***” sections). Sometimes, no symptoms are present.

How is it treated?

People can be treated without surgery if symptoms are mild. Over the counter medicines like Ibuprofen, Tylenol, and/or muscle relaxers can be very helpful. Physical therapy to strengthen and stretch your upper back and neck muscles can reduce the stress on your neck and improve your posture. Occupational therapy can work on hand coordination, and gait training. Steroid injections around your spinal cord and nerve roots or into the joints of the spine can occasional help too. With non-surgical treatment, close, regular follow up is needed to watch for symptom worsening. If this occurs, surgery is often needed.

The right surgery for cervical stenosis depends on your symptoms, exam and imaging studies. This can include either an artificial disc replacement, laminoplasty or cervical fusion with decompression (See “ACDF/ADR”, “Laminoplasty”, “Posterior Cervical Fusion with Decompression” sections). Your surgeon will help decide what surgery is right for you.