

Lumbar spinal stenosis

Patient Information



What is lumbar spinal stenosis?

Spinal stenosis is a narrowing of the spaces within your spine. It can put pressure on the nerves that travel through the spine and can cause leg pain with or without low back pain.

It is quite a common problem particularly in older people and is usually caused by the natural aging process of the spine. It can also affect younger people, but this is less common. Leg pain related to lumbar spinal stenosis typically occurs when walking. Most people find that sitting down or leaning forward eases the symptoms and they can then walk again. Classically, walking is more comfortable when leaning e.g., onto a shopping trolley.

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Warning signs

Lumbar spinal stenosis is not usually a cause for concern. However, if you have severe pain, which gets worse over several weeks, or if you are unwell for example have a fever, you should contact your doctor or call NHS 111.

Very rarely, stenosis can cause a serious condition called Cauda Equina Syndrome, which can lead to permanent damage or disability and will need to be managed by an Emergency Specialist Spinal Team. If you have a new onset of any of the symptoms below, you should attend the **Emergency Department immediately**. Be reassured that the condition is rare, particularly in older age groups.

- Loss of feeling/pins and needles or numbness between your inner thighs or around your genitals, back passage or buttocks
- Altered feeling when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- Increasing difficulty when you try to urinate
- Increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control your flow of urine
- Loss of sensation when you pass urine
- Leaking urine or recent need to use pads
- Not knowing when your bladder is either full or empty
- Inability to stop a bowel movement or leaking
- Loss of sensation when you pass a bowel motion
- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate or loss of sensation in genitals during sexual intercourse

Prognosis

The outcome is very variable, and without treatment, the symptoms may worsen gradually. Although treatments for spinal stenosis are often effective at reducing symptoms, the symptoms don't usually completely resolve. Because of this it is very important to keep as active as you can, strengthen your muscles around your legs and back and keep your weight at a healthy level to ensure the best possible outcome.

How to manage the symptoms of lumbar spinal stenosis;

Pain Relief

- Simple pain killers can be used to help manage your pain. Ask your local pharmacist for advice. Please follow the instructions on the packet carefully.
- Your GP can prescribe stronger medication or nerve pain modifying drugs if required.

Keep Active as able

- A walking stick can often help make walking more comfortable. In more severe cases, a four-wheeled walking frame with a seat can be very useful.
- Cycling (e.g., static exercise bike) and swimming are good forms of regular exercise if you feel safe to do them. They are usually comfortable for people with lumbar spinal stenosis.

Positions of ease

- Many people find that sitting down or bending forward (e.g., leaning on a wall) helps to ease their pain.
- Try and pace your walking. Most people find they can walk a certain distance before their leg pain comes on. Take short rests to allow the symptoms to ease then you can continue.

Weight loss

- If you are overweight, weight loss can help decrease the forces through your spine and thereby alleviate symptoms.

Exercises

- Simple exercises can be useful if performed regularly. Try the exercises in this leaflet as a starting point. Start slowly with just a few repetitions and gradually increase the number you are doing. You may find a mild ache with exercises; this is ok if it settles within 30 minutes of finishing the exercise. If you find an exercise causes severe pain or pain that lasts longer than 30 minutes, stop and seek advice from your GP or physiotherapist.

1) Lumbar rotation

Lying on your back, gently roll your knees side to side in a slow controlled way and as far as you feel comfortable to go. Repeat 5-10 times to each side



2) Pelvic Tilt

Lie flat on your back with your knees bent. Keep your feet, knees, hips and shoulders in line. Tilt your pelvis back by gently drawing in your stomach muscles and pressing your lower back (lumbar spine) onto the bed and hold for 10 seconds. Breathe normally throughout the exercise. This will strengthen your tummy muscles to help hold your spine in a better position when walking.



You could try holding this pelvis position to flatten the arch in your back while walking – it can alleviate symptoms in some cases.

Other treatments to manage spinal stenosis

Spinal injections are not recommended by NICE guidance for most cases of spinal stenosis. Spinal surgery can be helpful in some cases but carries risks. If you have tried the measures in this leaflet and followed the advice of your health professional, but you are still not finding your symptoms manageable, talk to your GP or physiotherapist about whether it may be useful to investigate these options.

Further Information

If you would like to seek the advice of a physiotherapist, there are a number of options within Wiltshire. Please speak to your GP practice about the ways you can be referred.

Alternatively you can visit our website for further information on accessing our services;

<https://wiltshirehealthandcare.nhs.uk/physiotherapy/>

Useful websites:

<https://www.activewiltshire.org.uk/>

Here you will find information on improving your activity level and details of what is available in your local area.

<http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk/public-health-weight>

Here you will find information about weight management options in your local area.

Health improvement coaches - Wiltshire Council

Health Improvement Coaches work on a one to one basis to support behaviour change and improve health. They concentrate on behaviours associated with ill health including unhealthy eating often linked to obesity, stop or reduce smoking, sensible drinking, increasing physical activity, building confidence and motivation to change and boosting self-esteem, they also signpost and support clients to access other services and activities where appropriate.

Safeguarding

Wiltshire Health and Care (WHC) are committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, young people and adults at risk of abuse, including victims and survivors of domestic abuse. We expect all WHC staff to share this commitment and promote safeguarding by implementing WHC policies and procedures, act promptly on concerns and share information appropriately.

If you or your carer have any concerns regarding a child or adult's safety, please phone Wiltshire Safeguarding Team on 0300 456 0111 (Adult) or 0300 456 0108 (Child) (9am – 5pm Monday - Friday) or please call 999 if you feel they are in immediate danger.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

If you have any questions, or concerns, suggestions or compliments about our service, please speak to a member of staff.

This information sheet is available in other languages and formats. If you would like a copy, please contact us on 0300 123 7797 and whc.pals@nhs.net

Patient and Public Involvement

We value your opinions which will help us to further develop our services. If you wish to provide feedback or get involved in our patient participation groups, please email the Patient and Public Involvement Officer at ask.wiltshirehealthandcare@nhs.net or telephone 01249 454386.