Spinal Stenosis

Spinal stenosis is a narrowing of the spaces where nerves leave the spine. This puts pressure on the nerves causing pain, numbness or tingling. It is a common condition as people age. It is caused by joint swelling, scarring, with discs that are less flexible with age or arthritis. If you have had arthritis in your spine, a slipped or herniated disk, or any other back or neck injury, you are more at risk.

Signs

Stenosis most often occurs in the lower back, called lumbar stenosis. Signs may include:

- Pain and numbness in one leg is common, but it could be both legs
- Numbness, cramping or pain in the back, buttocks or legs that are worse when standing or when walking but ease when sitting or leaning forward
- Problems walking for long periods without sitting to take a break

It can also occur in the neck, called cervical stenosis. Signs will be in the arm, shoulder and neck. Signs of spinal stenosis often get worse over time.

Testing

Your doctor will find the location of your pain during a physical exam. You may also have one or more of these tests:

- Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) – a test that uses radio waves and a magnetic field to take pictures of soft tissue and bones.
- Spinal scan or other test that uses a special computer called computerized tomography (CT) to take pictures of small segments of the spine. It can give a better picture of bones and tissue.
- X-ray may also be used to check your spine.
- Nerve conduction test, if you have numbness or tingling. This test may be done to check the health of the nerves in your back.

Your care

Work with your doctor and other health care team members on a treatment plan, which may include:

- Medicines to help with back pain
- Physical therapy to make the muscles stronger and to help with pain
- Braces
- Surgery to reduce pressure on your nerves or spinal cord

Talk to your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

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