Herniated Disc

The bones in your back encircle and protect your spinal cord. Nerves branch out from the spinal cord to the rest of your body. The nerves pass between openings in the bones. The bones are separated by shock-absorbing discs. Each disc has a soft spongy or jelly like center and a hard outer ring.

When the discs are healthy, they help to keep the spine flexible. The discs can be injured by poor posture, aging and incorrect lifting. When the disc weakens, the hard outer ring is not able to keep the soft spongy material in the middle of the disc. This is a called a herniated disc. Herniate (her-nee-ate) means that it bulges or sticks out.

Signs

When the disc pushes on the nerves that exit the spine, it can cause discomfort, such as:

- Back pain with numbness or tingling down your legs. Pain may increase when sitting or bending. Standing, walking or lying on your stomach may ease the signs, depending on the location and extent of the injury.
- Neck pain that spreads to shoulders or arms if the herniated disc is in the upper back.
- Muscle spasms or weakness.
Causes of herniated discs

The most common causes of herniated discs are:

- **Over use:** Wear and tear from repeated bending and twisting while carrying weight causes the disc to breakdown.

- **Trauma:** Rupture of disc through a weak place on the disc ring. Bending forward is a motion that can cause this type of rupture to occur.

- **Degenerative changes:** A normal part of the aging process. Herniated discs can happen at any age, but are more common between the ages of 30 and 45 years.

  Breakdown of the disc can cause the bones of the spine or vertebrae to move. Sometimes the body tries to repair the vertebrae by adding extra bone to the injured area and a bone spur will develop. Bone spurs can also put pressure on the spinal cord or nerves. This is called **degenerative disc disease** or **arthritis of the spine**.

Treatment

Talk with your doctor about the treatments and therapies that may work best to manage your care. Most back problems respond well to rest and physical therapy. He or she may suggest:

- Working with a physical therapist to develop an exercise program to strengthen your back muscles and improve your flexibility.

- Medicines to relieve pain, reduce muscle spasms, reduce inflammation in your back and relieve anxiety.

- Surgery. Your doctor may recommend surgery if you have:
  - Increasing numbness or weakness in your legs or arms
  - Loss or change in bladder or bowel control
  - An increase in pain
  - Trouble working or enjoying your normal activities.
Your doctor or physical therapist may also suggest that you:

- Limit bending forward at your waist as much as you are able. Bend your hips and knees instead. Also try to work at a higher surface or sit so you do not have to bend over.

- Do not carry or lift anything over 10 pounds. A gallon of milk weight about 8 pounds.

- When brushing teeth or doing dishes, open the cabinet door and place one foot on the cabinet base. This helps support your upper back without bending forward as much.

- Sit for no more than 30 minutes at a time, then get up and walk or lie down for 5 minutes. Put a timer on your desk to ring every 30 minutes as a reminder.

- Walk as much as you can, as long as it does not increase your signs. Walking helps nourish the disc and reduces swelling around the disc. It also gently strengthens your back muscles.

- If you have sciatica nerve pain (pain from the lower back, through the hips and buttocks, and down each leg), numbness or loss of strength in a leg, do not try to stretch your hamstrings. These are the muscles in the back of your upper leg. It is hard to tell if you are stretching the muscle or pulling on the nerve. Repeated pulling on the nerve may cause more injury.

- Use a firm mattress and rest in a comfortable position with your knees bent.

- When sleeping, use a pillow to help support your spine:
  - If you sleep on your side, place a pillow between your knees.
If you sleep on your back, place a pillow under your knees.

If you sleep on your stomach, place a pillow under your stomach.

- If back bending does not hurt, use the "cobra" yoga posture to stretch and traction your back.
  - Lie face down on the floor.
  - Lift your head and gently arch yourself backward.
  - Support yourself with your elbows under your chest.
  - Hold this position for 30 seconds.
  - Repeat two times each day.

Call your doctor right away if you have:

- Increasing numbness or weakness in your legs or arms
- Loss or change in bladder or bowel control
- An increase in pain
- Trouble working or enjoying your normal activities

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.