

Information on Spinal Stenosis

Back and leg pain when walking?

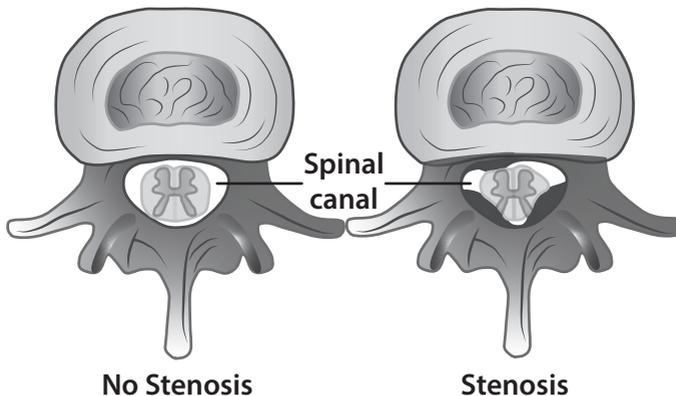


Lumbar spine stenosis

What is spinal stenosis?

Spinal stenosis is the medical term for a narrowing of the space in your back where your nerves are. This narrowing is a normal part of the ageing process and does not necessarily cause symptoms. In fact, many people have this type of narrowing but get no symptoms. Occasionally, this narrowing can cause a reduction in blood flow to the nerves. This is called neurogenic claudication - the medical term for when the nerves don't get enough blood flow to them. This reduction in blood flow is more likely to happen when your spine is in certain positions, such as standing for a long period of time. The lack of blood flow to the nerves can make them sore which will likely give you pain, numbness and, or tingling down your leg(s).

Spinal stenosis is a narrowing of the spinal canal



What are the usual symptoms of this?

The most common symptom that people describe is pain in their leg with or without back pain. This pain usually comes on after being in an upright position such as standing or walking for a time. These symptoms often feel better in a slightly bent forward position such as when sitting, cycling or pushing a trolley. This is because more upright postures reduce the blood flow to the nerve (because of the narrowing) and bending forwards allows a better flow of blood to the nerve.

Can anything be done to help this?

This condition is not harmful, but it can often have an impact on the quality of your life. There are a number of options that can help this back and leg pain, and your physiotherapist can discuss these various options with you.

Research suggests that there are exercises which you can do on a regular basis which can result in a significant improvement in symptoms. In fact in many cases, the improvements noted from these exercises were as helpful as surgery for spinal stenosis.

Your physiotherapist has given you this booklet because evidence shows that as well as the exercises, having a better understanding of what is causing your pain and how to manage it will help you to get back to the things that you enjoy doing with less pain.

Should I be concerned about anything?

Spinal stenosis does not normally cause any serious problems. There are some symptoms that anyone with back or leg pain should look out for. These are:

- New changes in your bladder or bowel function (accidents, having to rush very suddenly to the toilet, not being sure whether you have fully emptied your bladder or not).
- New changes in sexual function.
- A reduction in your ability to feel your back passage or genital area (maybe being unable to feel the difference between wind or poo or feeling altered sensation such as tingling or pins and needles when wiping the toilet paper on your skin).
- A large amount of sudden, unexplained weight loss.
- New night sweats (where you wake up overnight drenched in sweat).

If you are experiencing any of the first 3 symptoms you should attend your local Accident and Emergency department. If you experience either of the last 2 symptoms, you should speak to your General Practitioner (GP). If you are unsure if you are experiencing any of these symptoms, you should discuss this with your GP, your physiotherapist or call **NHS 24** on  **111**.

Exercise Regime

1. Bending exercise – progress from level 1 - 4 as able.

Level 1 - Pelvic tilt

Lie on your back on a flat, stable surface. Bend your knees so that your feet are flat on the surface. Imagine that you are gently lifting up the base of your spine towards the ceiling and slowly tilt your pelvis backwards. As you do this you should draw your back down to the floor. Aim to hold this for 20 seconds and repeat ____ times.



Level 2 - Knee to chest

Lie on your back with your low back relaxed. Slowly draw one knee and then the other knee towards your chest, pulling with your arms from behind your knees to gain as much bend as comfortable. Aim to hold for 10 seconds. Slowly relax your legs back to the starting position one at a time. Repeat ____ times.



Level 3 - Hands and knees (angry cat to child's pose)

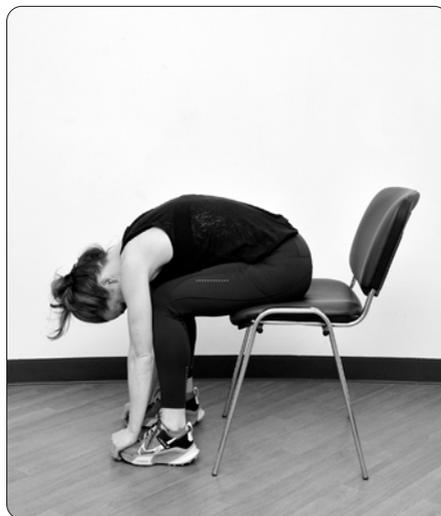
Place hands and knees onto stable surface into a table position. Relax and then slowly lift your spine upwards as far as is comfortable. Then as you breathe out, slowly sink your hips backwards onto your heels. Hold for 10 seconds and then return to the start position. Repeat ____ times.



Level 4 - Forward bend in sitting

Sitting on a stable chair with your feet planted on the floor. Slowly bend forwards towards the floor as far as you feel able. Hold for 5 seconds and then slowly return to starting position.

Repeat ____ times.



2. Aerobic exercise

Perform 20 minutes of aerobic exercise per day. This is exercise that makes you a little hot, sweaty and breathless. To begin with you will find that a bending forward exercise like stair climbing or cycling will be easier and so you should start with 20 minutes of this

comfortable exercise. As you begin to feel more comfortable you should start to reduce your bent forward exercise and gradually add in some walking on a flat surface. Continue to add more walking to the mix until you are doing 20 minutes of walking only.



3. Lower limb strengthening (all 4 exercises)

Side leg lifts

Lie on your side. Lift your leg upwards about a foot or so high off the ground making sure that you keep your foot a little behind you. Hold for 5 seconds and then slowly lower the leg. Repeat ___times.



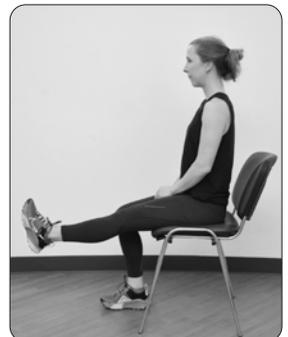
Bridging

Lie on your back with your knees bent up so that your feet are flat on the ground. Slowly tighten your stomach muscles to flatten out your back. Then slowly lift your hips up as high as able. Aim to have a straight line through your hips, knees and ankles. Hold for ___seconds. Repeat ___times.



Knee extensions

In sitting, slowly extend out one leg at a time. Hold in a straightened position for ___seconds. Repeat ___times.



Squats

In standing, bend your knees half of the way as if you are going to sit down on a chair, keeping your feet flat on the floor, and hold for seconds. Then slowly straighten your legs. Hold onto a stable surface if you need to. Repeat ___ times.



4. Lower limb stretching (both stretches)

Hamstring stretch

Lie on your back, then slowly pull one knee into your chest. Holding onto the back of your knee, slowly straighten your knee. Hold for ___ seconds. Repeat ___ times.



5. Hip flexor stretch

Lying on your back, pull one knee into your chest whilst gently dropping the other leg over the edge of the bed. Hold this for ___ seconds. Repeat ___ times.



Or you could kneel into a lunge position and tuck your bottom underneath you. Hold ___ seconds. Repeat ___ times.



With all exercises make sure that you remain relaxed - use pillows if required for comfort... and remember to breathe.

Top tips for managing the pain when out and about!

1. Use forward bending if this helps your back and leg pain. When the pain comes on why not try stopping and leaning on a fence or sitting on a bench for a few minutes until the pain settles again?
2. Walk with your hips in a tilted position - by tucking your hips underneath you can put your back into a more open position for blood flow and will often reduce your pain when walking or standing.
3. Remember that general movement and the position of your hips can be a good pain reliever.
4. Use your painkillers! Remember that painkillers often take a short while to have an affect and so you should take them in plenty of time before you go for a walk.
5. Consider weight loss. This can often be helpful at changing the mechanics of the spine and also reducing the load through the spine.

The condition of spinal stenosis is not harmful but can have a significant impact on your quality of life. Although these exercises can help a large number of people to manage their pain symptoms they do not help everyone. If after trying these exercises you still have limitation of your walking due to persistent and severe leg symptoms, then surgery on your lower back may be beneficial. If surgery needs to be considered, then onward referral to the orthopaedic or neurosurgery department may be appropriate.

With thanks to Claire MacKelvie and Becky Dumphey for their contribution to the original version of this leaflet.

Want some more info? Check out the following links...

🌐 <http://www.back.com/back-pain/conditions/lumbar-spinal-stenosis/index.htm>

🌐 <http://www.csp.org.uk/publications/10-things-you-need-know-about-your-back>



Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy

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