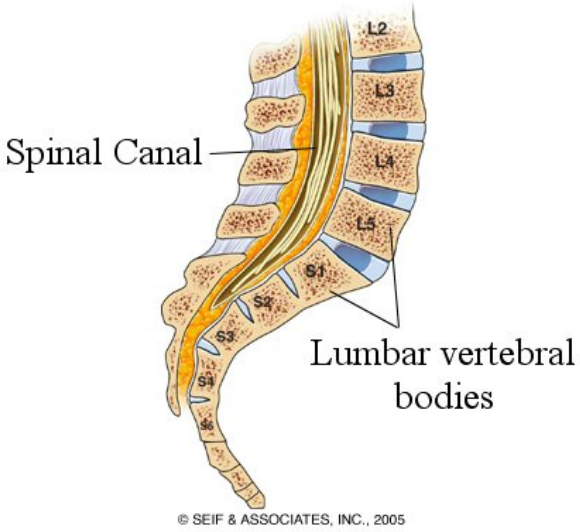
Spinal Stenosis

One cause of back pain is spinal stenosis. Stenosis means narrowing. The spinal canal contains and protects the spinal cord and nerve roots. In spinal stenosis, the spinal canal narrows and pinches the spinal cord and nerves. This causes low back pain and pain in the legs. Stenosis may pinch the nerves that control muscle power and sensation in the legs. This leads to pain and abnormal feelings in the muscles and areas supplied by those nerves. Spinal stenosis often comes with aging as boney growths occur in the spinal canal. There is also a loss of the cartilage between the bones of the back which also adds to this problem. Sometimes the problem is present since birth.



SYMPTOMS

- Pain can be made worse with activities.
- Numbness, tingling, hot or cold feelings, weakness or a weariness in the legs.
- Clumsiness, frequent falling and a foot-slapping gait which may come as a result of nerve damage and muscle weakness.

DIAGNOSIS

- Your caregiver may suspect spinal stenosis if you have unusual leg symptoms as mentioned above.
- Your orthopedic surgeon may request special x-rays to find out the cause of the problem.

TREATMENT

- Sometimes treatments such as postural changes or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs will relieve the pain.
- Flexing the spine by leaning forward while walking may relieve symptoms.
- Lying with the knees drawn up to the chest may offer some relief.
- These positions enlarge the space available to the nerves. They may make it easier for stenosis sufferers to walk longer distances.
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications may help relieve symptoms. They do this by decreasing swelling and inflammation.
- Rest, followed by a gradual resumption of activity, also can help.
- Aerobic activity, such as bicycling, is often recommended.
- Losing weight can also relieve some of the load on the spine.
- When stenosis causes severe nerve root compression, conservative treatment may not be enough to maintain a normal life style. Surgery may be required.

SURGICAL TREATMENT

Your orthopedic surgeon may recommend surgery to relieve the pressure on affected nerves. In properly selected cases, the results are very good, and patients are able to continue a normal lifestyle.

Most of this information courtesy of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgery.

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