Degenerative Disc Disease

Degenerative disc disease is a condition caused by the changes that occur in the *spinal discs* (cushions of the backbone) as you grow older. Spinal discs are soft and compressible discs located between the *vertebrae* (bones of the spine). They act like shock absorbers. Degenerative disc disease can affect the whole of the spine. However, the neck and the lower part of the back are most commonly affected. Many changes can occur in the spinal discs with aging. They are:

- Spinal discs may dry out and shrink.
- Small tears can occur in the *annulus* (tough outer covering of the disc).
- The disc space can become smaller due to loss of water.
- Bone *spurs* (abnormal growth in the bone) can occur. This can cause pressure on the nerve roots exiting the spinal canal leading to pain.
- Spinal canal may get narrowed.

Degenerative disc disease causes neck and back pain. This condition is treated by applying heat or ice and by taking medicines to relieve the pain. Your caregiver may suggest surgery, if the pain does not improve by these methods.

CAUSES

Degenerative disc disease is a condition caused by the changes that occur in the spinal discs with aging. The exact cause is not known but there is a genetic basis for many patients. Degenerative changes can occur due to loss of fluid in the disc. This makes the disc thinner and reduces the space between the backbones. Small cracks can develop in the outer layer of the disc. This can lead to the breakdown of the disc. You are more likely to get degenerative disc disease if you are overweight. Smoking cigarettes and doing heavy work such as weight lifting can also increase your risk of this condition. Degenerative changes can start after a sudden injury. Growth of bone spurs can compress the nerve roots and cause pain.

SYMPTOMS

The symptoms vary from person to person. Some people may have no pain, while others have severe pain. The pain may be so severe that it can limit your activities. The location of the pain depends on the part of your backbone that is affected. You will have neck or arm pain if a disc in the neck region is affected. You will have pain in your back, buttocks, or legs if the disc of the lower back is affected. The pain becomes worse while bending, reaching up, or with twisting movements. The pain may start gradually and then get worse as time passes. It may also start after a major or minor injury. You may also feel numbness or tingling in the arms or legs.

DIAGNOSIS

Your caregiver will ask you about your symptoms and activities or habits that may cause the pain. He may also ask about any injuries, diseases or any treatments that you have had earlier. Your caregiver will examine you to check for the range of movement that is possible in the affected area, check for strength in your extremities and sensation in the areas supplied by different nerve roots supplying the arms and legs. X-ray of the spine may be included. Your caregiver may suggest other imaging tests, such as an MRI, if needed.

TREATMENT

The treatment includes rest, modifying your activities, and applying ice and heat. Your caregiver may prescribe medicines to reduce your pain and ask you to do some exercises to strengthen your back. Sometimes, you may need surgery. You and your caregiver will decide on the treatment that is best for you.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Follow the proper lifting and walking techniques as advised by your caregiver.

- Maintain good posture.
- Exercise regularly as advised.
- Perform relaxation exercise.
- Alter your habit of sitting, standing, and sleeping as advised. Change positions frequently.
- Lose weight.
- Stop smoking.
- Use supportive footwear.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

The pain does not go away within 1-4 weeks.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- The pain is severe.
- You notice weakness in your arms, hands, or legs.
- You begin to lose control of your bladder or bowel.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

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