

Herniated disc

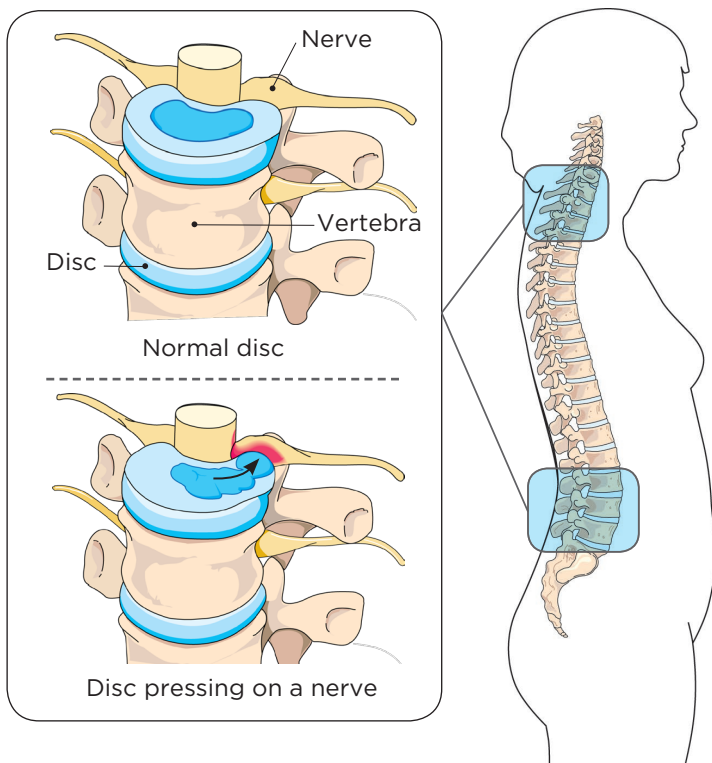


Your doctor thinks you may have a herniated disc. This fact sheet explains what it is, the problems it can cause, and its possible treatments.

What is a herniated disc?

A herniated disc is an injury to an intervertebral disc. Intervertebral discs are plates of cartilage located between the vertebrae in your spine. A hernia occurs when a disc moves out of alignment and presses on one or more nerve roots. Hernias usually happen in the neck or lower back.

Herniated disc



What are the symptoms of a herniated disc?

Some possible symptoms are:

- Severe pain in the neck or lower back.
- Pain that radiates further, especially into the arms, buttocks, and legs (sciatic pain).
- This pain is stronger when you cough, sneeze, or move your bowels.
- Legs that are numb and weak.

Why do I have a herniated disc?

Often the cause of a herniated disc is poor posture. This problem occurs especially when:

- you carry heavy loads, which leads to changes in posture
- you make movements that involve bending your back
- you make repetitive movements
- you carry unbalanced loads on one shoulder only
- you move in other ways that involve twisting the spine
- you have a job that requires you to sit all the time

Who is at risk of having a herniated disc?

The risk of developing a herniated disc is greatest among:

- people who are overweight or obese
- smokers
- tall persons
- pregnant women
- the elderly
- people whose jobs are physically demanding

What are the potential complications?

They are related to the severity of the hernia. The more pressure there is on the nerve root, the more serious the impacts are likely to be:

- severe pain
- less strength or feeling in the hernia area
- difficulty holding in urine or stools



What tests or examinations will I need to have?

The physician may sometimes order one or more examinations of the affected area:

- a scan of the lower back
- a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan
- an examination of muscle activity (electromyography, or EMG)

What is the treatment for a herniated disc?

BASIC CARE

Treatment always begins with resting and taking pain-killers and anti-inflammatory medications.

Here also are some possible actions you can take to relieve discomfort:

- > apply heat and cold (ice, for example) alternately to relieve pain and reduce the swelling that occurs in these cases
- > do gentle activities
- > take breaks during and between activities
- > keep your back straight

PHYSIOTHERAPY

It is effective in most cases.

It involves:

- strengthening the muscles that stabilize the spine
- doing stretching exercises
- training to use correct posture



MEDICATIONS

Medications can be given to relieve pain and swelling or to relax muscles. If the pain persists, the doctor could propose injecting cortisone (an anti-inflammatory) into the back at the level of the hernia.

SURGERY

The aim of surgery is to free up the compressed nerve root in order to stop sciatic pain. In most cases, though, back or neck pain does not improve. The doctor might propose this surgery in the most serious cases.

See the fact sheet on [Treating a herniated disc with surgery.](#)

When should I consult my doctor?

See your doctor right away if:

- you can't feel your foot and are no longer able to move it
- you can no longer hold your urine and stools (incontinence)

You may need **urgent surgery**.

Can this problem be prevented?

Yes, in 2 ways:

> Maintain good posture in your daily activities.

- To lift heavy loads, crouch down before picking them up. Then stand upright. This uses the muscles in the legs and abdomen and keeps the load close to the body when lifted.
- Keep your body and head aligned during activities (such as working at the computer).



> Develop good exercise habits.

- Stretch and warm up your muscles before physical exertion.
- Do exercises to strengthen your back and stomach muscles.
- Adopt a healthy lifestyle (eat well, don't smoke, stay active, etc.).



Who can I contact for help or to ask questions?

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact your doctor or nurse. Let them know if you have any questions, concerns, or worries.

You can also call the nurse in the Neurology Clinic at the CHUM.

> 514 890-8123



USEFUL RESOURCES

For information on lumbar disc herniation:

> healthlinkbc.ca

Enter "lumbar herniated disc" in the search box.

> backcarecanada.ca

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante

The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal
chumontreal.qc.ca



Questions

Write down any questions you want to ask your care team so you don't forget anything.





Observations - Comments

Write down observations you feel are important: your symptoms, treatments, follow-up, energy level, spirit, etc.





Upcoming appointments

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal
chumontreal.qc.ca