

What exactly is a herniated disk?



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What is a cervical disk herniation?

The musculoskeletal structure of the neck is made up of a series of bones with shock-absorbing disks in between. There are seven of these bones, called cervical vertebrae. The disk between each of these bones is made of a thick outer lining, which contains the softer central core of the disk. A disk herniation occurs when one of the disks gets a tear in the thicker outer lining and the center



portion of the disk protrudes out, or “herniates.”

What are the causes?

Most of the time, a patient will not be able to recall a specific event or injury that caused the herniation. The most common presentation is a patient waking up in the morning with new onset of neck and/or arm pain.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually include a combination of neck and/or arm pain. The arm pain is typically down just one of the arms, but can be in both. The pain may only be in the shoulder, but can often extend down into the forearm and hand. Weakness may also accompany the arm pain. For this reason, a thorough physical examination is necessary. Neck and shoulder problems can often mimic one another depending on which disk in the neck is affected. Again, a thorough examination and imaging tests, such as an X-ray and MRI, can be used to assist with the diagnosis.

What is the treatment?

As with any orthopedic condition, conservative treatment is typically the first option. This course can include physical therapy, traction, medications, and injections. If no response is seen after 3-4 weeks of conservative care, operative intervention can be considered. However, surgery may be more urgent if weakness is discovered at first examination. Weakness typically indicates a severely compressed nerve in the neck. If weakness is allowed to persist, it can be difficult to resolve. In such cases, surgery may be preferable.

What kind of surgery is performed?

Typically, cervical disk herniations are addressed with an operation from the front of the neck. The typical operation is called an anterior cervical discectomy and fusion (ACDF). This operation has been performed for over twenty-five years with 90-95%

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good-to-excellent results. More recently, disk replacement surgery has become available. Disk replacement surgery is essentially the same operation as an ACDF, however, the disk space is not fused. Instead of placing a piece of bone in the disk space, as with an ACDF, the surgeon places a prosthesis that allows motion to occur. There are ongoing

studies examining whether a disk replacement is beneficial over an ACDF.

What is the recovery time following surgery, and what activities will I be able to do?

Surgery typically involves an overnight hospital stay. Arm pain usually recovers within days of surgery, and patients can

typically get back to work in days to weeks. Full recovery is typically four to six weeks. With an ACDF, patients typically do not notice any loss of motion or function.

If you feel you have a cervical disk herniation, we would be happy to see you and alleviate your pain.

For more information or to schedule an appointment please call 605-665-1722.