



SPINE WORKS INSTITUTE COMPREHENSIVE SPINE CARE



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What is Spinal Stenosis?

One of the more debilitating diseases of the spine that causes a significant of pain and a decrease in enjoyment of life is spinal stenosis. What is spinal stenosis? Spinal stenosis is a condition in which the spinal canal of the spine becomes narrowed in one or more areas. This narrowing causes the nerves to be pinched. The signals that travel from the brain to the muscles of the legs are slowed down and sometimes even stopped because of the bottleneck that occurs in the lumbar spine. Patients will complain of numbness, heaviness, or pain that occurs in one or both of the legs. Typically the patient describes that they are limited in the ability to walk and to stand for long periods of time because their legs ache, feel heavy and feel numb. These symptoms are typically relieved when the patient sits down.

I've coined this term the Wal-Mart disease because I think a visit to Wal-Mart best describes this particular disease. On a visit to Wal-Mart on any given day you can usually see people walking around using shopping carts as a walker. You will see men and women leaning over their shopping carts in a hunched over position to go about their daily shopping. The reason that leaning over is necessary is that when a person leans over at the waist it has a tendency to open up the spinal canal thus relieving the spinal stenosis. Standing straight up will typically decrease the size of the canal and worsen the symptoms. By using a shopping cart patients can lean over further and open up the canal to a greater extent and decrease their symptoms. In severe cases obviously people have to use a motorized wheelchair to go about their shopping.

So what can be done about spinal stenosis? One of the most important things to understand about spinal stenosis is that nearly everyone at some point in their life will develop spinal stenosis. Some people develop it at a much younger age than others.

Exercise and maintaining a high level of activity is the first thing to remember for people who suffer from spinal stenosis. Over-the-counter anti-inflammatory medications can help alleviate some of the symptoms. In cases that are significant epidural steroid injections can be of benefit. These steroids are placed into the canal to decrease the inflammation around the nerves that are being pinched by the stenosis and help to alleviate the symptoms. The downside to steroid shots is that oftentimes they are temporary. They can last a year, six months or in some cases only a matter of days or weeks.

In patients whose symptoms are severe enough and who have tried non-operative care sometimes it is necessary to go in and open up the canal. With the advents of new technology and smaller incisions this is not nearly as large of a surgery that it used to be and the results are usually excellent.

If you or someone you know suffers from spinal stenosis, we invite you to contact one of the doctors at the Spine Works Institute for a consultation.

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