

Cervical Disc Disease

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The spine is made up of vertebrae, which are separated by intervertebral discs. The disc is a combination of a hard outer layer, known as the annulus fibrosis, and a soft inner layer, known as the nucleus pulposus. The disc acts a cushion or “shock-absorber” for the spine. As you age, the disc starts to lose some of its water content and becomes less effective in terms of shock absorption. This may lead to the center of disc “rupturing” or “herniating” through the annulus fibrosis.

Occasionally when the disc herniates, it may “impinge” or touch the spinal nerves that travel nearby. This may lead to neck pain as well as pain, numbness, tingling or weakness in the arms.

Your sports medicine physician will determine if you have this problem after discussing your symptoms and performing a physical examination. Depending on your symptoms, further investigations may be ordered (xrays, CT, MRI) to help the physician make the appropriate diagnosis and determine what the best treatment plan is for each individual patient.

While a herniated disc sounds serious, most people are able to return to their normal activities within several weeks or months with only conservative treatment. This includes the use of anti-inflammatory medications, physical therapy and the avoidance of activities that increase the neck pain. In addition you may consider seeing a practitioner that specializes in “manual” medicine. Occasionally, a trial of steroid injections into the neck may help decrease ongoing inflammation.

Surgical treatment is indicated for some patients, especially those with symptoms not responding to conservative treatment. This often helps relieve the pain in the arm, though it may not relieve the symptoms in the neck. The goal of the surgery is to remove the part of the disc that is “pressing” on the spinal nerve. This is often accomplished via a “discectomy”. Sometimes the physician may have to remove some of the bone as well. After surgery, many physicians will still recommend physical therapy to strengthen the spine and relieve pain.