

# Spinal Stenosis

## Service User Information Leaflet

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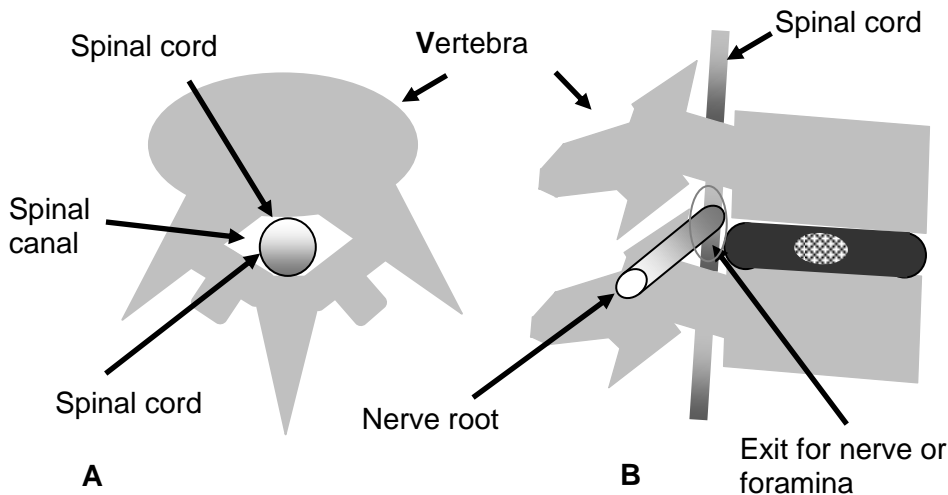
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Produced by NHS Fife Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy Service

Diagrams (Spinal Exercises © PhysioTools)

## What do we mean by 'Spinal Stenosis'?

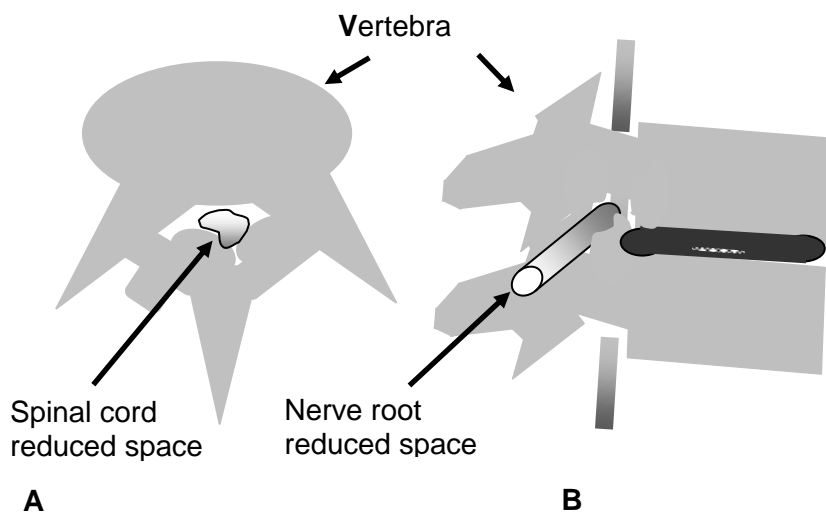
Your spine is made up of many levels of bone (vertebrae) with soft discs between the bones. Behind the bony segments is a canal containing your spinal cord which runs from your head down to your pelvis. At each level between the bony segments are two holes (called foramina) one on the left and one on the right. A pair of nerves come out through these holes, one on the left side and one on the right side. In the lower back these nerves pass into the legs to supply the muscles and feeling to the legs. Stenosis means narrowing of the canal (canal stenosis) and/or the (holes on the side) where the nerves exit (foraminal stenosis).



**Figure 1** Normal spinal canal viewed from A) above and B) from the side.

There are 2 main causes for spinal stenosis.

- 1) Some people are born with narrow spinal canals or foraminal spaces.
- 2) Part of the spinal canal or side holes (foramina) get narrower with age. This is due to the disc becoming thinner as we get older and the spaces between the levels reduce in size. The joints around the spine can also increase in size. These changes can combine to reduce the spinal canal space or exit for nerve (foraminal space), leaving less room for the nerves (Figure 2).



**Figure 2** Spinal canal with stenosis viewed from A) above and B) the side.

### **What are the symptoms of spinal stenosis?**

Most people with spinal stenosis have difficulty walking and standing for any length of time. This is because standing straight can narrow the space for the spinal nerves causing pain in the buttocks or legs. Other related symptoms may include leg numbness and/or pins and needles.

People with spinal stenosis often find that if they sit or bend forward the pain eases off. People with spinal stenosis often report they walk better and further if they lean forwards. Leaning over a shopping trolley can sometimes help. Others report that they can cycle without pain, yet they are unable to walk 50 metres. This is because when we bend forward the spinal canal becomes wider. This gives the nerves more space.

In severe cases spinal stenosis can cause bladder disturbance such as slowness passing urine or loss of bladder control (urgency or increased frequency). These conditions, however, are common in older adults and may not be directly related to spinal stenosis. Canal stenosis can cause numbness around the back passage, with loss of bladder or bowel control but this is rare.



### **What can I do to help the pain?**

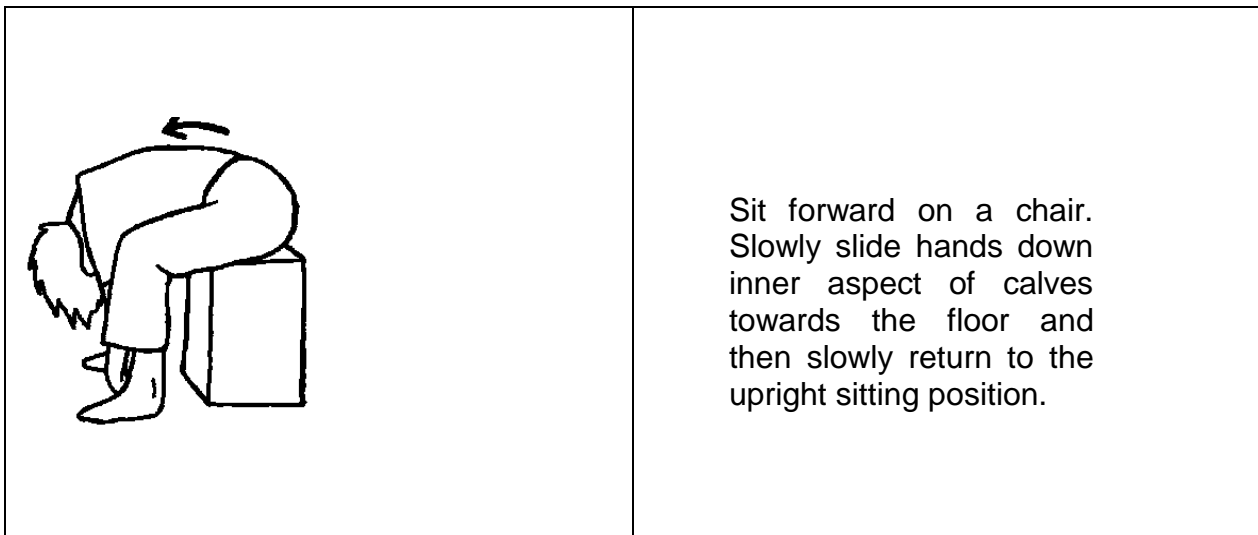
Take pain medication as prescribed by your GP. Many people find that using a walking aid helps them walk longer. A physiotherapist can assess you regarding the best type of walking aid.

### **What about exercise?**

Exercises which bend the spine forward may be of benefit. These exercises may help if the pain is not too severe (Figure 3). These exercises should not increase your symptoms. If you do experience an increase in your symptoms please cease the exercises. Try to repeat these exercises 2-5 times each and build the number as your pain allows.

**Figure 3 Exercises for spinal stenosis.**

	Lying on your back with your knees bent, tilt your bottom up to flatten the small of your back
	Lying on your back bring both hips and knees up towards the chest using your hands for assistance



### Would an operation help?

Sometimes an operation can help spinal stenosis. This operation widens the canal and is called spinal decompression. Decompression may give the nerves more room to function. A spinal surgeon will explain if surgery is possible.

### Is spinal stenosis serious?

Spinal stenosis can be very painful, but it is not usually serious and should not stop continuation with activities. However please contact the A&E Department if you develop the following symptoms:

### Cauda Equina Syndrome Warning Signs

Many patients have a combination of back pain, leg pain, leg numbness and weakness. These symptoms can be distressing, but do not necessarily require emergency medical attention. **A rare, but serious back condition, Cauda Equina Syndrome, can lead to permanent damage or disability and will need to be seen by an Emergency Specialist Spinal Team. Some warning signs of Cauda Equina Syndrome are as follows:**

- Loss of feeling/pins and needles between your inner thighs or genitals
- Numbness in or around your back passage or buttocks
- Altered feeling when using toilet paper to wipe yourself
- Increasing difficulty when you try to urinate
- Increasing difficulty when you try to stop or control your flow of urine
- Loss of sensation when you pass urine
- Leaking urine or recent need to use pads
- Not knowing when your bladder is either full or empty
- Inability to stop a bowel movement or leaking
- Loss of sensation when you pass a bowel motion
- Change in ability to achieve an erection or ejaculate
- Loss of sensation in genitals during sexual intercourse

Any one or combination of these seek medical help immediately

## **What is the future?**

In most cases the symptoms remain unchanged or with little variation over the years (60-70%).

There are also a few people who report that their condition improves with time. These people are able to walk further (15-20%).

Around 15-20% of people find their condition gets worse. Over time they find that the distance they can walk gets less and less. They then may wish to consider spinal decompression surgery.

## **When is it best to have an operation?**

There is no straight forward answer to this question. You have to balance the trouble you are having against the risks and benefits of surgery.

## **What are the benefits of surgery?**

Most people can expect about a 70% improvement in their symptoms with surgery. This means that they are able to walk further and stand for longer.

Surgery seldom takes the pain or altered sensation away. It has been found that people can walk two or three times further after surgery. Surgery is unlikely to change any of the following symptoms if they have been present for several months before the operations:

- Numbness in the legs or around the back passage
- Weakness of the ankle or foot
- Bladder or bowel dysfunction
- Back pain

## **Are there risks of surgery for spinal stenosis?**

The spinal surgeon can discuss the risks of surgery.

## **Useful Information**

Back Pain

[www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints](http://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/muscle-bone-and-joints)

NHS Inform Helpline: 0800 22 44 88

For free and confidential advice about work call the Healthy Working Lives Advice line on **0800 019 2211**. [www.healthyworkinglives.com](http://www.healthyworkinglives.com)