

Lumbar Spinal Stenosis

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What Is Lumbar Spinal Stenosis?

Lumbar spinal stenosis is a condition where the spaces in the lower back become narrowed. This narrowing can put pressure on the nerves that travel into the legs. It usually develops slowly over time due to age-related “wear and tear” changes in the spine.

Common Symptoms

- Pain or aching in the lower back
- Pain, heaviness, or cramping in one or both legs
- Numbness or tingling in the legs or feet
- Symptoms that worsen with standing or walking
- Relief when sitting, bending forward, or leaning on something
- Difficulty walking long distances
- A common feature is improvement when leaning forward (for example, pushing a shopping cart).

What Causes It?

Spinal stenosis is usually caused by gradual changes in the spine, such as:

- Thickening of spinal joints (arthritis), Bone spurs
- Bulging or worn spinal discs
- Thickened ligaments
- Loss of space in the spinal canal over time

How Is It Diagnosed?

Diagnosis is based on your symptoms, medical history, and a physical examination.

Imaging may be used to confirm the diagnosis:

- **MRI:** Best test to see nerve compression and narrowing
- **CT scan:** Used in some cases when MRI is not possible
- **X-rays:** Show arthritis and alignment changes but not nerves

Treatment

Most cases are treated without surgery, especially in early or mild to moderate stages. Treatment may include:

- Staying active with guided exercise

- Flexion-based exercises (bending forward movements)
- Core strengthening and stability training
- Stretching of the hips and lower back
- Low-impact aerobic exercise (walking on an inclined treadmill, biking)
- Chiropractic care or manual therapy when appropriate
- Decompression or traction therapy in selected cases

The goal is to reduce nerve pressure and improve walking and function.

Other Treatment Options

- Anti-inflammatory medications
- Pain-relieving medications
- Epidural steroid injections for temporary relief
- Surgery (such as decompression) in severe cases or when symptoms do not improve

Prognosis

The outlook varies depending on severity.

- Many people improve or remain stable with conservative care
- Some may require ongoing symptom management
- A smaller group may need surgery if nerve pressure becomes severe
- Progression is not inevitable, and many people maintain good function with treatment and exercise

Typical Duration of Care

- About **3 visits per week for 4 weeks** (around 12 visits) initially
- Reassessment after the first phase of care
- Total care may range from **12–24 visits over 4–6 months**, depending on progress
- Long-term exercise and walking programs are important for maintenance

When to Seek Medical Attention

Seek prompt medical care if you experience:

- Severe or worsening leg weakness
- Loss of bowel or bladder control
- Numbness in the groin or inner thighs
- Rapidly worsening walking ability
- Severe pain that does not improve

Key Point - Lumbar spinal stenosis is a common age-related condition. Many people improve with conservative, movement-based care focused on reducing nerve pressure and improving walking tolerance.