

Description

Cervical disc pathology refers to neck pain caused by an acute injury or chronic degenerative change to a cervical spine (neck) disc. The intervertebral discs are a shock-absorbing pad between the vertebrae in the neck, and when injured, swelling, pain and inflammation normally presents as a constant dull ache felt in the neck or shoulder blades, with or without referral into the arm and/or hand. Referred symptoms can include pain, pins and needles, numbness or weakness, or a combination of these.

Anatomy

The cervical spine is made up of 7 vertebrae (bones) and approximately 20 joints. There are three joints between each vertebra; one central joint, separated by a cartilage pad or disc and two joints either side that provide stability to each segment (facet joints). As we approach middle age (around 40), the normal gel-like cervical disc is generally hard and dry and the facet joints are becoming stiff.

The exit foramen are a narrow bony canal between each disc and facet joint that allow the 8 nerve roots on either side of the spinal column to exit the spinal cord and wind their way down into the upper limbs. These nerves transmit both pain and sensory information from the shoulders and arms to the brain and cause the muscles in this area to contract and therefore allow movement to occur. The nerve roots can be pinched or irritated in association with a disc injury as they exit through the narrow canal causing local neck pain and referred symptoms.

Causes

The disc in the neck can be damaged either by an acute trauma (eg. whiplash or direct blow to the head), or degenerative changes associated with:

- Activity related wear and tear
- Prolonged poor posture (workstation setup etc)
- Anatomical predisposition (the individual make up of your neck)
- Poor flexibility in the adjacent muscles, thoracic spine
- Poor deep neck stabilizer muscle strength



Signs & Symptoms

You may experience one or more of the following symptoms:

- Constant dull ache in the shoulder blade area
- Shooting or burning pain in one arm, hand or several fingers
- Upper limb muscle weakness (especially grip strength)
- Sharp pain in the neck (especially with fast or unexpected movement)

Prevention

Once an injury has occurred, you have a greater chance of recurrence of the same or similar injury. Your physiotherapist will advise you on the most appropriate exercises to continue to avoid recurrence. Disc injuries occasionally require surgical intervention and therefore should be thoroughly diagnosed with appropriate scans.

In any case, healing can be somewhat slow (12 or more weeks) due to poor vascularisation of the disc, and appropriate strengthening exercises and avoidance of aggravating postures is vital.

Please feel free to discuss any problems or queries with your physiotherapist or get up to date treatment options by subscribing online at www.rehabonthenet.com.