



## **Herniated Disk**

**Definition:** A herniated disk occurs when one of the shock absorbers between the bones (vertebrae) in your neck or back becomes damaged. This can occur in your neck, trunk or back area, and may involve different degrees of tissue damage. Disks are soft, rubbery pads found between the hard bones (vertebrae) that make up the spinal column. The disks between the vertebrae allow the back to flex or bend. The spinal canal is a hollow space in the middle of the spinal column that contains the spinal cord and other nerve roots.

**Common Terms:** Pinched nerve; bulging disk; slipped disk; ruptured disk; sciatica; lumbar radiculopathy; cervical radiculopathy; herniated intervertebral disk; prolapsed intervertebral disk.

**Typical Mechanism of Injury:** A herniated disk may occur because of gradual degeneration of the disk or from an injury like a slip and fall or a car accident. Repetitive twisting and turning activities may lead to disk degeneration, and poor posture while lifting can cause disk damage. Smoking and excessive body weight also contributes to disk disease – especially in the low back.

**Common Signs and Symptoms:** Low back pain affects most people at one time or another. The most common symptom of a low back herniated disk is sciatica – a sharp, shooting pain that runs from the buttocks down the back of one leg. In the neck, pain is also common. It usually occurs in the muscles between your neck and shoulder. The pain may shoot down the arm. The pain may also cause headaches. Other symptoms include weakness, tingling, "pins-and-needles", or numbness and burning pain centered in the neck or back. Muscular spasms may occur in the associated areas as well.

**Common Treatment:** Most neck or back pain will get better over time with rest and other simple measures. Surgery is rarely needed. Over-the-counter pain relievers will help with pain. Sometimes prescription muscle relaxers, pain relievers and anti-inflammatory medications may be needed. Cold compresses or ice can also be applied several times a day for 20 minutes at a time. As spasms get better, gentle heat applications may be used. In some cases, supervised rehabilitation may be very successful. Education on proper posture to avoid increased discomfort and maximize abilities to perform daily tasks is also helpful.

**Prevention:** Good posture and lifting techniques should be followed - especially if your occupation requires it. For example, if your normal routine requires you to lift heavy objects one should invest in a weight belt that will help prevent a herniated disk. Stopping smoking, losing weight and getting regular exercise all help reduce the risk of back and neck problems.

**Expectations:** Recovery may take a few days to several months. In most cases, some modification will be required, such as weight reductions, weight-lifting restrictions, or more frequent rest periods. Modifications of these kinds are extremely beneficial to prevent a recurrence of disk type injuries.

**DEPARTMENT OF ORTHOPAEDICS & SPORTS MEDICINE**  
Carol & Frank Morsani Center for Advanced Health Care \* 13330 USF Laurel Dr \* Tampa, Florida  
33612 \* (813) 396-9625 \* FAX (813) 396-9195 \* [www.health.usf.edu](http://www.health.usf.edu)