

Informational Guide to Cervical Radiculopathy

Introduction

Radiculopathy is caused by any condition that puts pressure on a nerve where it leaves the spinal column. The main causes of radiculopathy include degeneration of the spinal joints, disc herniation/bulging, and spinal instability.

As the spine ages it degenerates. The spaces where the nerves exit the spinal column between the vertebrae narrow due to arthritic changes such as joint enlargement, bone spurs and deterioration of the intervertebral disc (cushion between each bone of the spine).

Herniation occurs when the nucleus (inner portion of the disc) is compressed out through a tear in the annulus (outer portion of the disc).

The herniated material may press against a spinal nerve causing irritation down the arm.

Spinal instability in the neck can develop if the supporting ligaments have been stretched or torn from injury, such as whiplash. Those with diseases that loosen their connective tissue may also be affected. Whatever the cause, extra movement in the bones of the spine can irritate or put pressure on the nerves of the neck, causing radiculopathy.

Symptoms

The symptoms from radiculopathy result from pressure on an irritated nerve. The pain usually spreads down the arm and may involve numbness, tingling and weakness in the muscles of the shoulder, arm or hand. Functionally, this may result in difficulties with gripping, keyboarding, lifting and other fine motor activities of the hand.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis begins with a complete history and physical examination. Your motion, strength, reflexes and sensation will all be evaluated. An X-ray, MRI, CT scan, EMG, or other specialized tests may be warranted to conclusively diagnose the cause of the radiculopathy.

Treatment

Whenever possible, nonsurgical treatment is preferred in order to ease pain and other symptoms.

Patients often work with a physical therapist to decrease symptoms and improve postural strength and flexibility.

Patients may be prescribed medication to help them gain control of their symptoms so they can resume normal activity swiftly. A steroid injection may also be warranted depending on the particular cause of the radiculopathy.

Most people with radiculopathy get better without surgery; however, if the radiculopathy is causing significant arm weakness or getting worse rapidly surgery may be suggested to remove pressure from the nerves and improve function.

Rehabilitation

Your physical therapist will create a program to help you regain neck and arm function as well as decrease pain. Treatments include joint mobilizations or neck traction to take pressure off of nerves.

Though neck traction is often done in the clinic, your therapist may issue a home traction device.

Because it is very important to improve the strength and coordination in the neck and shoulder blade muscles, exercises are given. Your therapist will evaluate the way you use your body for everyday and work activities and provide changes to prevent further problems.

Rehabilitation after surgery can be a slow process and full recovery may take up to 4 months. Your therapist may use treatments such as heat or ice, electrical stimulation, massage, and ultrasound to help calm pain and muscle spasm.

More Information...

For more information please contact any of our three clinics in Roseville, Spring Lake Park, or Blaine where a knowledgeable therapist will be happy to assist you with your recovery needs.