

# Living with herniated disks:

## Treatment and relief options

**H**erniated disks, slipped disks, ruptured disks—by any name, they make life difficult and painful. The condition affects your ability to work, sleep, exercise and even sit. Most commonly, herniated disks occur in the lower back, or lumbar, section of the spine, but they can also occur in the neck's cervical disks.

Experts estimate between 80 percent and 90 percent of people with a herniated lumbar disk improve without surgical treatment. Your healthcare provider may suggest you first try conservative treatments to ease discomfort and improve function, such as:

- **Medications.** Over-the-counter or prescription medications include pain relievers, muscle relaxants and nonsteroidal medications.
- **Steroids.** These powerful anti-inflammatory medications can be injected or taken orally.
- **Heat-and-cold therapy.** Alternate applying cold and hot packs for 15 minutes at a time and note if one helps more than the other. However, avoid heat within the first 48 hours of the pain's onset because it can aggravate swelling.
- **Water workouts.** Gentle exercise in a pool may aid relaxation, help maintain mobility and help take the pressure off inflamed disks.
- **Physical supports.** A firm mattress and wearing a back brace or neck collar may ease some of the disk's

### What's a herniated disk?

**Y**our spinal disks act as cushions or shock absorbers between the vertebrae or bones of your spine. Disks are made up of a tough outer ring of fibrous tissue filled with a jellylike substance. When a disk swells, bulges, tears or ruptures (herniates)—which can be caused by injury or aging—it presses on nearby nerves, causing back, neck, arm or leg pain.



pressure on the nerves. Although bracing can help you maintain good posture and alignment during everyday activities, consider it a temporary solution since it can lead to weaker abdominal and back muscles.

- **Exercise/physical therapy.** Strengthening your back and abdominal muscles to better support and stabilize your spine can help relieve pain. Ask your provider or physical therapist for guidance about how to avoid reinjury.
- **Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS).** This method delivers tiny electrical currents to key points on a nerve pathway. TENS may offer relief by stimulating pain-blocking endorphins or blocking pain impulses.
- **Specialized injections.** Injections can target specific sites for cortisone injection or other treatment modalities.

Surgery is typically reserved for patients who have:

- Failed at conservative therapy
- Positive objective (physical examination) findings
- Positive MRI and imaging studies

### Get back to feeling great!

➔ For more information, contact the Northside Hospital Spine Center in Atlanta and Forsyth at (404) 459-1809 or visit [northside.com/spinecenter](http://northside.com/spinecenter).