

Do I Have a Herniated Disc?

What You Need to Know

What Is a Herniated Disc?

Your spine is made up of bones (vertebrae) stacked on top of each other, with soft cushions called discs between them. Each disc has a tough outer layer and a soft, gel-like center. When the outer layer weakens or tears, that soft center can push through — that's a herniated disc. It's sometimes called a "slipped disc" or "ruptured disc," though the disc doesn't actually slip or rupture completely.

It can happen anywhere in the spine, but the lower back (lumbar spine) and neck (cervical spine) are by far the most common locations.

What Does It Feel Like?

Symptoms vary depending on where the herniation is and whether it's pressing on a nerve. Some people have significant pain; others have surprisingly little.

In the lower back:

- A deep, aching pain in the low back that may come and go or be constant
- Sharp, shooting pain that travels down one buttock, into the thigh, calf, or foot — this is called **sciatica** and is one of the most common signs
- Burning or tingling that runs down the leg
- Numbness or weakness in the leg or foot
- Pain that gets worse when you sit, bend forward, cough, or sneeze
- Some relief when you stand, walk, or lie down in certain positions

In the neck:

- Aching or stiffness in the neck
- Sharp pain that shoots into the shoulder, arm, or hand
- Tingling or numbness down the arm or into the fingers
- Weakness when gripping or lifting

What Makes It Worse?

Most people notice their pain is worse with:

- Sitting for long periods
- Bending or twisting
- Coughing, sneezing, or straining
- Certain sleeping positions

How Did This Happen?

Herniated discs are usually caused by gradual wear and tear over time — the discs dry out and become less flexible as we age. They can also be triggered by:

- A sudden awkward movement or twist
- Lifting something heavy with poor form
- A fall or accident
- Repetitive bending or twisting at work or during sports

When Should I Be Concerned?

See a doctor or physical therapist promptly if you experience:

- Loss of bladder or bowel control (rare, but requires immediate medical attention)
- Severe weakness in both legs
- Numbness in the groin or inner thighs
- Pain so severe it is unmanageable

The Good News

Most herniated discs improve with conservative treatment — meaning surgery is often not necessary. Physical therapy is one of the most effective treatments available. A physical therapist can help reduce pain, restore movement, strengthen the muscles supporting your spine, and teach you how to move in ways that protect your back going forward.

The majority of patients see significant improvement within **6 to 12 weeks** with the right treatment plan.

This information is for general educational purposes only and is not a substitute for a professional evaluation. If you think you may have a herniated disc, call us today — we have immediate openings with no waitlist.

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