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"treating the cause of your problem, not just the symptoms"

Is it Really a Slipped Disk?

You've probably heard people say they have a "slipped" or "ruptured" disk in the back. What they're actually describing is a "herniated disk", a somewhat common but definitely over-diagnosed source of lower back pain (I say this because there are many other more common causes of low back pain and they are often misdiagnosed as a herniated disk).

Disks are soft, rubbery pads found between the hard bones (vertebrae) that make up the spinal column. In the middle of the spinal column is the spinal canal; a hollow space that contains the spinal cord and other nerve roots. The disks between the vertebrae allow the back to flex or bend. Disks also act as shock absorbers.

The outer edge of the disk is a ring of gristle-like cartilage called the annulus. The center of the disk is a gel-like substance called the nucleus. A disk herniates or ruptures when part of the center gel-like nucleus pushes the outer edge of the disk into the spinal canal, and puts pressure on the nerves (see diagram). In severe cases, the gel-like nucleus pushes right through the gristle-like annulus and forces itself into the spinal canal.

There are many different factors that can contribute to a person having a herniated disk. The first is that disks have a high water content, which decreases as people age. This causes the disks to shrink in thickness, making them less flexible and less able to handle stress and strain. The second is when a disk is exposed to excessive wear and tear. An example is a person who, for prolonged periods of time, drives vehicles or heavy equipment over rough ground, causing repetitive jarring or bouncing. These compressive forces will eventually damage the disks. The third is when a person is overweight. This puts unnatural stress on the disk and will make it prone to herniation. The fourth is poor posture over long periods of time. This also causes stress on the disks and can promote their breakdown or weakening. The fifth is heavy or repetitive lifting using improper techniques. Small tears in the disks can occur, making it much more prone to future herniation.

Low back pain, whether it is related to a herniated disk or not, affects four out of five people. Therefore, the presence of pain alone is not enough information to be able to

make a diagnosis of a herniated disk. The most common symptom of a herniated disk is “sciatica”. This is a sharp, often shooting pain that extends from the buttocks down the back of one leg. This is due to the irritation or pinching of the “sciatic nerve”. To make matters even more confusing, there are other more common and less severe causes of low back pain that can cause the exact same sharp “sciatica” symptoms. Yes, this means that the presence of low back pain as well as sciatica still does not necessarily mean a herniated disk is present.

If you are experiencing even mild low back pain and/or sciatica, see your chiropractor immediately. Chiropractors examine and treat more patients with low back pain than any other health care practitioner. Their in-depth training will ensure that an accurate diagnosis is made and the most conservative form of treatment is used first.

