

What is a Cervical Radiculopathy?

Some people have neck pain that may radiate into the shoulder, arm, or hand that can sometimes be misdiagnosed as carpal tunnel syndrome or cubital tunnel syndrome. This type of pain is often caused by an injury near the root of a spinal nerve. The medical term for a “pinched” nerve in the neck is a cervical radiculopathy.

Cause

As spinal discs age, they lose height and begin to bulge. They also lose water content and become stiffer. As the discs lose height, the vertebrae begin to move closer together and degenerate. The body recognizes the thinning of the disc as a possible weak area and responds by splinting the joint with more bone, often called “spurs,” around the disc to strengthen it. The bone spurs that grow also contribute to the stiffening of the spine. Bone spurs may narrow the tiny holes where the nerves exit the spine and pinch the nerve root.

The disc changes that occur with age are often referred to as degenerative disc disease. It is important to keep in mind that all of these changes are oftentimes “normal” and that they occur in nearly everyone. In fact, if MRI scans were performed on people greater than 50 years of age, nearly half of the scans would show degenerative discs and pinched nerves that do not cause painful symptoms. It is not completely understood why some patients have symptoms and others do not.

Symptoms

Cervical radiculopathy is pain that travels down the arm in the area of the involved nerve. This pain is usually described as sharp. There may also be a “pins and needles” sensation or even complete numbness. In addition, there may be a feeling of weakness with certain activities.

Symptoms can be worsened with certain movements, like extending the neck backwards or turning the head from side to side. These symptoms are often made better by placing the hand on top of the head to relieve the nerve tension.

Examination

After reviewing your medical history and symptoms, your chiropractor will examine your neck. This should include testing your strength and sensation as well as reflexes. Your chiropractor may also have you do certain neck and arm movements to try to recreate or relieve your symptoms. X-rays may be ordered to show the extent of damage to the bones and discs of the neck. They can also show any narrowing of the holes where the nerves exit.

Treatment

It is important to note that the vast majority of patients with cervical radiculopathy get better with chiropractic care and never require surgery. Some patients will have the pain go away quickly, over days to weeks, while others will have it take longer. It is also not uncommon for cervical radiculopathy to come back at some point, but again, this problem usually gets better with conservative treatments.

As with most spinal conditions, healing takes time. In my opinion, it is advisable to undergo a reasonable trial of conservative care consisting of approximately six to 12 treatments, depending on the severity. If at some point the condition significantly worsens or fails to respond adequately to conservative care, your chiropractor should refer you for a CT scan, MRI, or a surgical consultation to be sure that there is nothing more sinister evolving.

If you or someone you know is suffering from back or neck pain and have not found the relief you are looking for, please contact our office. We may be able to help you.

*Information provided by Christopher M. Renze, D.C., D.I.B.C.N. of Renze Chiropractic Clinic, P.C.
For more information, visit www.renzechiro.com or call the office at 965-3844.*