

Herniated Disk

KEY POINTS

- A herniated disk is when the cushion of tissue between the bones of your spine bulges out of place.
- A herniated disk may be treated with physical therapy, a brace, or sometimes with medicine or surgery.
- Keeping your muscles strong and using good posture can help prevent disk problems.

What is a herniated disk?

A herniated disk is a disk that has bulged out from its proper place in your neck or back. Disks are rubbery cushions between the bones of the spine (vertebrae). Disks act as shock absorbers between each of the bones of the spine. When a disk bulges out, it may press on nearby nerves and cause pain and other symptoms.

Sometimes a herniated disk is called a ruptured disk.

What is the cause?

A herniated disk most often results from wear and tear on the spine as you get older. Sometimes it's caused by an injury. You may be more likely to have a herniated disk if you keep straining your neck or back. This could happen, for example, from not using proper technique when you lift, push, or pull something heavy. Being overweight can also put extra stress on your back. You may also be at higher risk for a herniated disk if you:

- Smoke
- Sit for long periods of time without lower back support
- Work on a laptop computer for long periods of time
- Drive a lot such as if you are a truck driver

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of a herniated disk may start slowly or suddenly. Where you have symptoms depends on where the herniated disk is in your spine. The most common symptoms are numbness, tingling, pain, or weakness in your buttocks, shoulders, legs, or arms. You may also have trouble controlling your bowel or bladder.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms, activities, and medical history. Your provider will examine your spine. Tests may include:

- Tests of the strength, feeling, and reflexes in your arms and legs
- X-rays
- CT scan, which uses X-rays and a computer to show detailed pictures of the spinal cord and the tissues around it

- MRI, which uses a strong magnetic field and radio waves to show detailed pictures of the spinal cord and tissues around it
- Electromyogram, which is a test of electrical activity in your muscles

How is it treated?

Your healthcare provider may recommend:

- Rest. It's best to try to stay active, so try not to rest in bed longer than 1 to 2 days or the time your provider recommends.
- Medicine. Several types of medicines may help lessen back pain. It may be medicine you take by mouth, or your provider may give a steroid shot into your spine. Take all medicine as recommended by your healthcare provider.
- Physical therapy. This may include massage, traction (force applied to your spine to help relieve pressure on your nerves), or other treatments. You may be given exercises to help strengthen your back so you are less likely to hurt it. You may learn how to protect your back when you are working or playing sports.
- A neck collar or back brace. Wearing a brace for a short time may help keep your neck in the right position while it is healing.

With treatment, the pain should get better within a few weeks, but you may keep having some pain for a few months. If you keep having pain, your provider may give you a shot of a steroid medicine. If your symptoms continue, your provider may recommend surgery, but usually surgery isn't needed.

How can I take care of myself?

To help relieve pain:

- Take pain medicine according to your healthcare provider's instructions.
- Put an ice pack, gel pack, or package of frozen vegetables wrapped in a cloth on the painful area every 3 to 4 hours for up to 20 minutes at a time. After a few days, a heating pad set on low, or a covered hot water bottle, may also help.

Always use good posture to keep extra pressure off your spine.

- Stand up straight with your shoulders back and your belly in. If you have to stand for a long time, move around often and shift your weight from one foot to another. If possible, put one foot up on a footrest that is about 6 to 8 inches high. This keeps your back straight and puts less pressure on your spine.
- Sit in chairs that give good support for your lower back. Keep your feet flat on the floor or up on a footrest. Get up every 20 minutes or so and stretch.

When you need to lift something heavy, don't bend from your waist. Bend your knees and squat down by the thing you are lifting. Keep your back as straight as possible. Use your thigh muscles instead of your back to do the lifting. Don't twist. Always keep things close to your body when you lift, lower, or carry them.

When you sleep, find the position that's most comfortable for you and that supports your back. For example:

- Lie flat on your back on a firm mattress or on a mattress with a stiff board under it. Put a pillow under your knees when you lie on your back.
- Lie on your belly with a pillow under your chest.
- Lie on your side with a pillow between your legs.
- If you cannot get comfortable, try lying flat on your back with your legs raised so that your knees are bent at a 90-degree angle. This is the same angle they would be if you were sitting up straight in a chair. One way to rest in this position is to lie on the floor, bend your knees, and rest your lower legs on the seat of a chair.

Follow your healthcare provider's instructions, including any exercises recommended by your provider. Ask your provider:

- How and when you will get your test results

- How long it will take to recover
- If there are activities you should avoid and when you can return to normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup. Keep all appointments for provider visits or tests.

How can I help prevent a herniated disk?

- Keep your muscles strong so that they can help support your spine better. Walking and swimming are examples of good exercise for strengthening and protecting your spine.
- Lose weight if you are overweight.
- Practice good posture.

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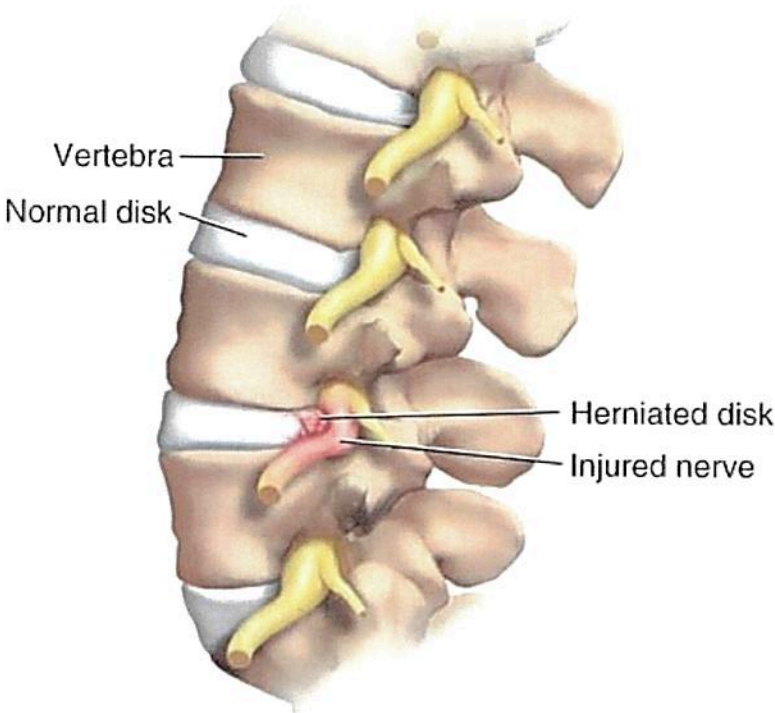
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[References](#)

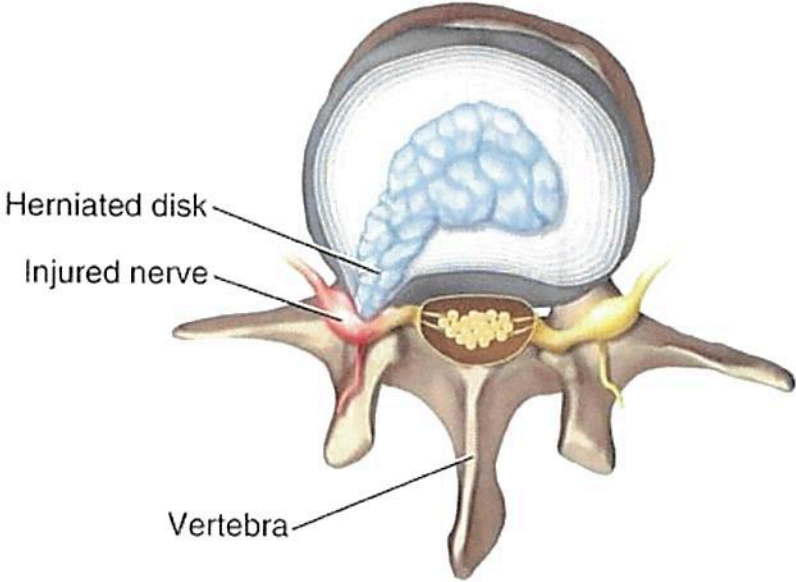
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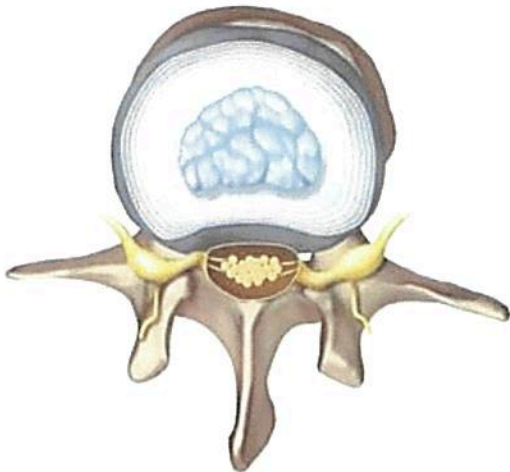
Herniated Disk



Side View



Top View



Normal

Herniated Disk Exercises

Your healthcare provider may recommend exercises to help you heal. Talk to your healthcare provider or physical therapist about which exercises will best help you and how to do them correctly and safely.

- **Extension exercise**

1. Lie face down on the floor for 5 minutes. If this hurts too much, lie face down with a pillow under your stomach. This should relieve your leg or back pain. If your leg pain continues, try using another pillow underneath your stomach. When you can lie on your stomach for 5 minutes without a pillow, you can continue with Part B of this exercise.
2. After lying on your stomach for 5 minutes, prop yourself up on your elbows for another 5 minutes. If you can do this without having more leg or buttock pain, you can start doing part C of this exercise.
3. Lie on your stomach with your hands under your shoulders. Then press down on your hands and extend your elbows while keeping your hips flat on the floor. Keep your back relaxed as you do this. Hold for 1 second and lower yourself to the floor. Do 3 to 5 sets of 10 repetitions. Rest for 1 minute between sets. You should have no pain in your legs when you do this, but it is normal to feel some pain in your lower back.

Do this exercise several times a day.

- **Abdominal drawing-in maneuver:** Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Try to pull your belly button in towards your spine. Hold this position for 15 seconds and then relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times.
- **Side plank:** Lie on your side with your legs, hips, and shoulders in a straight line. Prop yourself up onto your forearm with your elbow directly under your shoulder. Lift your hips off the floor and balance on your forearm and the outside of your foot. Try to hold this position for 15 seconds and then slowly lower your hip to the ground. Switch sides and repeat. Work up to holding for 1 minute. This exercise can be made easier by starting with your knees and hips flexed toward your chest.
- **Gluteal stretch:** Lie on your back with both knees bent. Rest your right ankle over the knee of your left leg. Grasp the thigh of the left leg and pull toward your chest. You will feel a stretch along the buttocks and possibly along the outside of your hip. Hold the stretch for 15 to 30 seconds. Then repeat the exercise with your left ankle over your right knee. Do the exercise 3 times with each leg.
- **Quadruped arm and leg raise:** Get down on your hands and knees. Pull in your belly button and tighten your abdominal muscles to stiffen your spine. While keeping your abdominals tight, raise one arm and the opposite leg away from you. Hold this position for 5 seconds. Lower your arm and leg slowly and change sides. Do this 10 times on each side.
- **Dead bug:** Lie on your back with your knees bent, arms at your sides, and feet flat on the floor. Draw in your abdomen and tighten your abdominal muscles. While keeping your abdominal muscles tight and knees bent, lift one leg several inches off the floor, hold for 5 seconds, and then lower it. Repeat this exercise with the opposite leg. Then lift your arm over your head, hold for 5 seconds, and then lower it. Repeat with the opposite arm. Do 5 repetitions with each leg and arm.

Once this exercise gets easy, raise one leg and the opposite arm together. Hold for 5 seconds. Lower your arm and leg and raise the opposite arm and leg up and hold for 5 seconds. Do 3 sets of 5 repetitions.

Walking is also good exercise for you.

If you have a herniated disk, you should not drive or sit for more than 30 minutes at a time.

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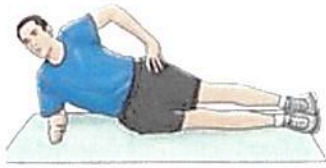
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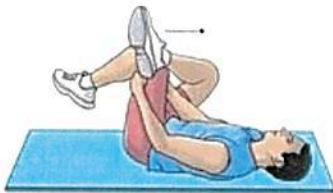
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Herniated Disk Exercises



Side Plank



Gluteal stretch



Quadruped arm and leg raise

A



B



C



Extension exercise

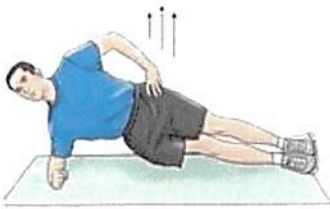
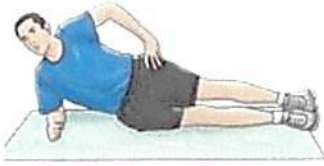


Abdominal drawing-in maneuver

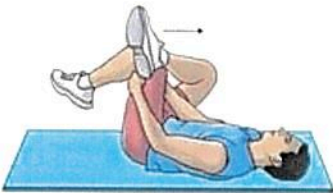


Dead bug

Herniated Disk Exercises



Side Plank



Gluteal stretch



Quadruped arm and leg raise



Extension exercise



Abdominal drawing-in maneuver



Dead bug