

Stenosis of Lower Back: Treatment Options for Spinal Narrowing

Stenosis of lower back, or spinal stenosis, is a narrowing of the space where nerves are in your back. It can cause back and leg pain or numbness and tingling in the legs. It might limit what you can do.

This decision aid is not for people with back or leg pain from other causes.

Patient Questions	Treatment without surgery	Shots in your back (epidural injections)	Surgery
What does the treatment involve?	Options include exercise, physiotherapy, support brace, and painkillers.	A steroid shot is injected into your back to try to reduce swelling. This may take about an hour. Discuss local availability.	You will have surgery to reduce pressure on nerves in your back. You may stay in the hospital up to 3 days.
Will it help my pain?	There may be less pain as soon as 2 weeks. Up to 70 out of 100 people (70%) will have less pain for many years.	There may be less pain in 2 weeks or so. Pain will not lessen in the long term compared to not having shots.	Most people have less pain. It is hard to know if this is because of surgery or for other reasons.
What are the side effects?	It depends on the treatment. Side effects may be more common with some painkillers than with exercise or physiotherapy.	About 30 out of 100 people (30%) may have worse pain, headache, fever, infection, flushing in the face, or a change in voice. Side effects may last for a few hours or days.	You may have severe pain for a few days. Pain with movement may last a month or so. Out of 100 people taking painkillers after surgery, about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 25 (25%) have nausea ● 13 (13%) itch ● 5 (5%) vomit
What are the risks?	Does not apply	Up to 3 out of 100 people (3%) may have a serious problem such as infection or heavy bleeding.	Up to 25 out of 100 people (25%) may have leaking of spinal fluid, bleeding, infection, nerve damage, or need for more surgery.
How long until I recover?	Does not apply	You can be back to your usual activities the next day.	It is hard to know when you can be back to your usual activities or driving. Out of 100 people who worked before surgery, more than 60 (60%) may not return to work for various reasons and less than 40 (40%) may return.

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Competing Interests

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