

Slipped Disc - Some Plain Facts From A Layman's Perspective

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Abstract

The problem of slipped disc is being explained from the perspective of a layman who has gone through the excruciating pain associated with it and the treatment . It is hoped that this article will give enough knowledge and understanding to people to understand the gravity of the situation and take precautions throughout life to avoid any recurrence.

1 Introduction

Slipped Disc or Slip Disc as it is commonly called is one of the most painful and common problems with the spinal cord we observe these days. Every second or third male has gone through this problem at one stage or the other in their lives. In most of the cases it does not happen overnight, but gets aggravated over the years. It is generally observed in people who have a heavy and tall body frame.

2 Description of the Problem

Different people have different understandings of the problem called slipped disc of the spinal cord. It is not any disc which has got slipped. It is the case of the soft tissue in between the vertebrae of the spinal cord, called disc, getting pressed and deforming, in the process pressing against the nerves and causing excruciating pain or numbness in different parts of the body, usually the lower back area or the feet.

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2.1 Human Anatomy

The human spinal cord comprises of different bone segments called vertebrae joined to form the passage way for the nerves of the human body and extends right from the neck area down to the lower back area fusing with the buttocks area. The disc in between these vertebrae is made of soft tissue called cartilage and has an outer hard surface and a soft inner. It acts as shock absorber absorbing shock or excess forces which act on the vertebrae.

2.2 Cause of Slipped Disc

The muscles around the waist support the body and the spinal cord when we do any heavy work or lift heavy weights. Due to a sedentary life style as different from the active life of our forefathers of yesteryears, the muscle supporting our waist and spine is under exercised leading to the wasting of the muscle over time. When the muscle gets weak, the function of supporting the body weight gets transferred to the spine and through it to the discs between the vertebrae.

Slipped disc or ruptured disc or herniated disc as the ailment is commonly called, happens when the external cover of the disc between these vertebrae ruptures under pressure over time or on quick reflexes of the body to lifting or pushing heavy weights.

2.3 Diagnosis and Treatment

Diagnosis of the ailment is done by the doctor with the help of X-Rays or MRI scans. Asking the patient to lift the leg with the knee kept straight and by finding the angle at which pain starts, the doctor is able to find out the severity of the ailment. The X-Rays and scans help the doctor to find out the details of the ailment to decide around which vertebrae to start traction and so on.

The treatment for slipped disc are two fold, conventional or non-conventional.

Conventional treatment is the cheapest but takes time to recover. It sure is the safest with very low probability of side effects and failure. It involves subjecting the patient to traction where weights are suspended by means of ropes tied to a belt around the waist of the patient around the lumbar area of the spine. The principle involved here is that when the pulling from the leg area downward takes place, the pressure on the disc is relieved allowing it to regain its natural shape over time. Usually traction is done for periods from two days to two weeks depending on the severity of the case.

The unconventional technique is resorted to when the damage to the disc is severe. It consists of invasive surgery which removes the disc altogether or part of it, restricting mobility of the patient, though not mobility altogether. The patient can be discharged very soon and can get back to work in a few days. Besides being expensive and involving hospitalisation, this method carries its own risks associated with any invasive surgery.

While medication for the conventional treatment only involves painkillers to relieve pain initially, for the unconventional method, the medication is related to the quick healing of the wound and preventing bacterial infections.

2.4 Post Treatment Care

After the treatment, care has to be taken to see that the backbone is not excessively strained for a period of two to three weeks. After a week the patient is advised to start exercises on his own without causing any pain and hence damage to the disc or nerves. Gradually the intensity and duration of exercises should increase.

Exercises involve lying on the back and lifting the legs one at a time to smaller angles and later to right angles. Later both legs are lifted at the same time. Exercises done by lying on the tummy and lifting the legs and top part of the body helps strengthen the back muscles.

2.5 Precautions

Long walks are recommended for patients after recovery. Walking helps relax not only the muscles of the leg, but also of the back, resulting in good flexibility of the back muscles and immediate reflexes in case of sudden jerks or movements. During the initial stages of recovery, it is very essential to see that jerks, sudden movements and lifting of weights are avoided at all costs. Walking is good at all times for patients. Regular walking helps not only the back muscles, it also keeps one in good fitness and helps keep weight in control. Controlling the food intake and avoiding high fat and sweet food is recommended to keep body weight under control.

2.6 Alternate Sources of Medication

Ayurveda has got time tested remedies for Slipped disc and other ailments of the spinal cord. It involves application and massage of the spinal area with hot medicated oil. This treatment even though effective to relieve pain initially, its efficacy as a treatment method in the long run is yet to be scientifically established.

3 Conclusions

Usually total recovery takes anywhere between one to two years. Practicing yoga is a very useful regimen for the back even though Indian doctors are yet to approve of such a treatment. In foreign countries, the potential of yoga in treating backbone problems has been established by research studies and is recommended to strengthen the back muscles. Observing the precautions is a must as otherwise it can lead to serious problems involving invasive surgical procedures and exposing one to unnecessary risks.

References

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[2] Discussions with Dr. Prakash Phadke, Orthopaedics specialist, at the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay hospital.