

Arm Pain

Degenerative conditions in the vertebrae of your lumbar spine, or low back, are a common source of leg pain.

If you are experiencing arm pain, the source of your discomfort may not actually be in your arm, but in your neck. The neck, or cervical spine, is made up of seven vertebrae separated by shock-absorbing intervertebral discs and supported by muscles and ligaments, and also is rich in spinal nerves and nerve roots.

When you feel pain, it's a reaction to signals transmitted throughout your body. These signals are sent from the pain source through the nerves in the spinal cord and into the brain, where they are perceived as pain. Problems that originate in the cervical spine may result in pain and other symptoms, such as tingling, numbness and muscle weakness, which may be localized in the neck and/or extend into the shoulders, arms and hands. The medical term for symptoms that radiate into the extremities is radiculopathy, derived from the Latin words "*radix*," or roots, and "*pathos*," which means disease.

Acute Pain vs. Chronic Pain

Acute pain is commonly described as sharp and severe; it tends to come on suddenly but also improve with time and short-term conservative treatment, such as medication, exercise, physical therapy or rest.

Chronic pain is commonly described as a deep, aching, dull or burning pain, and may be accompanied by numbness, tingling and/or weakness that extends into the extremities. Chronic pain tends to last a long time and is not relieved by conservative care.

What's Causing My Arm Pain?

The intervertebral discs of the cervical spine are very important for the normal mobility and function of your neck. When healthy, these discs act as "cushions" for the individual bones of the spine, or vertebrae.

Each disc is made up of two parts:

- The *nucleus pulposus* - the soft, gel-like center of the disc.
- The *annulus fibrosis* - the strong, fibrous outer ring that surrounds and supports the *nucleus pulposus*.

Over time, intervertebral discs can become dried out, compressed or otherwise damaged, due to age, genetics and everyday wear-and-tear. When this happens, the *nucleus pulposus* may push through the *annulus fibrosis*. Disc degeneration also may result in bone spurs, also called *osteophytes*, or spinal stenosis, the narrowing of the area of the spinal canal.

If disc or bone material pushes into or impinges on a nearby nerve root and/or the spinal cord, it may result in pain, numbness, weakness, muscle spasms and loss of coordination, both at the site of the damage and elsewhere in the body, since most of the nerves for the rest of the body (e.g., arms, chest, abdomen and legs) pass from the brain through the neck.

These symptoms and the conditions that cause them are collectively referred to as degenerative disc disease, if the condition has become chronic over time. Similar symptoms, however, may occur suddenly if the disc nucleus dislodges acutely and causes nerve root compromise, a condition referred to as a herniated disc.

When Should I See My Doctor?

If you are suffering from chronic arm pain or pain as a result of a physical trauma involving your neck, such as a fall or car accident, you should seek treatment from a physician.

Consult a physician immediately if you:

- Are experiencing numbness in, or having difficulty moving, your extremities
- Experience bladder control loss or impairment
- Develop a fever or severe headache
- Are over 60 and have been taking steroids for a long period of time
- Experience chest pain or pain in the left arm
- Are pregnant
- In instances of acute back pain, do not experience any improvement after 72 hours of self-treatment at home
- Have experienced chronic leg pain for more than 6 weeks

If you are experiencing arm pain, talk to your doctor about appropriate treatment options. Identifying the cause of your arm pain, alleviating the pain - either at home or with your physician's help - and avoiding re-injury are key to the healing process.