

Learning About Pinched Nerves

What is it?

A pinched nerve (nerve entrapment) is a problem that happens when a nerve is squeezed in a tight space in the body. Nerves can get pinched between bones, tendons, or muscles. This often happens because of an injury, overuse, or aging. Pinched nerves can be painful.

What causes it?

The cause depends on what nerve is affected. Muscles, bones, tendons, or scar tissue can squeeze nerves. So can swelling, tight shoes or equipment, or an injury. Pinched nerves are also more likely to happen with overuse, staying in one position too long, or having conditions like arthritis.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of a pinched nerve may include pain, tingling or numbness, or weakness. They may be felt in the area of the body served by the nerve. The symptoms can get worse when you move in certain ways.

How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor will do a physical exam. Depending on where you have symptoms, the exam will include watching how you move, checking your reflexes to see how your nerves are working, and checking for muscle weakness.

Your doctor may order tests, such as:

- Nerve tests. These tests show how well and how fast the nerves send electrical signals to your muscles.
- X-rays.
- Imaging tests, such as an MRI or a CT scan. These tests can show what's putting pressure on a nerve.

How is it treated?

Treatment for a pinched nerve depends on which nerve is affected. Treatment can include rest, stretching, and anti-inflammatory medicines. It can also include steroid shots and sometimes surgery. Other treatment may include wearing a brace, orthotics, or other types of support for the area.

How can you care for yourself at home?

- Follow your doctor's advice for rest, level of activity, how to protect the area, and stretching.
- Be safe with medicines. Read and follow all instructions on the label.
 - If the doctor gave you a prescription medicine for pain, take it as prescribed.

- If you are not taking a prescription pain medicine, ask your doctor if you can take an over-the-counter medicine.
- Try ice or heat to help reduce pain. Put ice, a cold pack, a heating pad set on low, or a warm cloth on the sore area for 10 to 20 minutes at a time. Put a thin cloth between the ice pack or heating pad and your skin.
- Don't spend too long in one position. Take short breaks to move around and change positions.
- Avoid moving in ways that make your symptoms worse.

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