

Understanding Your Neck Pain

By Dr. Glenn Buttermann

The spine is comprised of vertebrae and discs. The **cervical spine** (your neck) contains the seven upper vertebrae in your back and is a flexible column. Neck pain is very common. Most episodes of neck pain are caused by muscle strain. This does not sound like a serious injury, but the pain can be severe.

Neck pain also results when your cervical spine is damaged or arthritic. Some common problems with the cervical spine can range from tearing of the outer part of the disc (annular tear) or a **herniated** (protruded) disc to vertebrae rubbing against each other or slipping out of place. A **spondylolisthesis** is a forward slippage of a vertebra over a lower segment. Stenosis may be present. **Stenosis** is narrowing in the spinal canal that occurs when excessive growth of bone or tissue is present.

The vast majority of patients will undergo extensive nonoperative treatment such as physical therapy prior to surgical intervention. Spinal injections and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications may also be helpful in treating symptoms that are not advanced. Persistent pain, or pain and numbness in your upper extremities (arms or arms and hands), or weakness may best be treated by surgery if they are not responsive to non-surgical treatments.

A widely used surgical procedure to the cervical spine is "Anterior Cervical Discectomy and Fusion" (ACDF). It is a well established surgical treatment for spine patients with the appropriate indications such as disc herniation, spinal stenosis or advanced degenerated and painful discs. Decompression surgery is the surgical removal of any material that places pressure on the spinal cord or nerves.

Unlike ACDF which fuses the vertebrae together and reduces mobility, surgical disc replacement is increasingly being used to treat many of the same conditions. In certain cases a patient may be a candidate for a disc replacement which can also be combined with a decompression surgical procedure. When total disc replacement surgery is performed instead of a fusion, continued mobility through the affected level is allowed and has the added advantage of reducing stress and damage to neighboring cervical discs.

The timing of treatment after initial presentation to the spinal surgeon often depends upon the severity of the symptoms or if there is a potential for a progressive neurological deficit. Expert physical examination can help diagnose the exact level within the cervical spine that is causing problems. Dr. Glenn Buttermann is a spine surgeon from Midwest Spine Institute seeing patients with spinal conditions in Stillwater, Vadnais Heights, Burnsville and Baldwin, WI.

For your convenience, Midwest Spine Institute physicians and mid-level providers currently see patients at 15 locations throughout the Twin Cities, Western Wisconsin and surrounding areas.