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Herniated Disc

- **Definition:** A spinal disc is made of a central gel-like material called the nucleus pulposus and a firm outer structure called the annulus fibrosus. A herniated disc occurs when the nucleus pulposus pushes or bulges its way through the annulus fibrosus.
- **Cause:** Bending, lifting and twisting all put pressure on the disc over time and can weaken the outer structure (annulus fibrosus). With enough time and pressure, the nucleus pulposus can be pushed out through the outer layer. This in turn can cause mechanical and/or chemical pressure on the spinal cord or the exiting nerve roots.
- **Symptoms:** Pain, numbness and/or weakness into one or both extremities are signs that a nerve root is being compressed or irritated by a herniated disc. Symptoms can develop slowly or suddenly. Back or neck pain may or may not be present. In the low back, the classic presentation is acute back pain later followed by leg pain or "sciatica". Symptoms can vary in location depending on which nerve root is affected. It is often difficult to find a position of comfort, but often sitting, sneezing, and coughing will worsen symptoms.
- **Diagnostics:** A thorough history and physical examination are key in making the diagnosis. An MRI or other imaging may be ordered in certain cases to further evaluate the location and severity of a herniated disc. Sometimes an EMG (electromyography) is performed to help assess the nerve health.
- **Treatment:** The vast majority of patients will improve with conservative care within 3 months. This can include anti-inflammatory or other medications, physical therapy, and exercise. Steroid injections can be helpful in severe or more persistent cases. Severe cases that are refractory to other treatments may require surgery. Long term weight control is beneficial in treating and preventing disc herniations.
- **Red Flags:** Progressive numbness or weakness, bladder or bowel retention or incontinence, severe pain, or symptoms lasting longer than 6 weeks all warrant immediate medical attention.

