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Spinal Stenosis

- **Definition:** Spinal stenosis is a condition where there is narrowing of the central spinal canal or the canals on either side of the spine where the nerve roots exit. Symptoms tend to occur when there is compression on the spinal cord or exiting nerve roots.
- **Cause:** Typically, stenosis occurs secondary to arthritic changes in the spine. This includes any combination of disc degeneration, bone spurs, or thickening of ligaments. This tends to occur slowly over time before symptoms develop.
- **Symptoms:** Symptom severity can range from minimal to severe and many may have no symptoms at all. The most common presentation of lower back stenosis is pain in the low back, buttocks, and back of the thighs. In the neck, stenosis can cause pain into the arms or hands. Other symptoms include numbness or weakness in the affected extremities. Symptoms are often worsened with extension (standing upright, looking up) and improved with flexion (bending or leaning forward).
- **Diagnostics:** A thorough history and physical exam may be enough to diagnose spinal stenosis. In many cases, imaging studies are helpful in confirming the diagnosis and ruling out other conditions that can mimic stenosis. Other possible studies include x-rays, MRI's, or CT scans. Sometimes an EMG is performed to assess the health of the nerves.
- **Treatment:** Symptom severity and nerve function are what help dictate treatment. Minor cases can be treated conservatively with physical therapy and exercises. Sometimes more aggressive treatments are warranted, including medications or injections. For severe cases that are refractory to other treatments, surgery may be indicated.
- **Red Flags:** Seek immediate care if you have progressive weakness in an extremity or lose control of your bladder or bowels.

