

Degenerative Disc Disease

OVERVIEW

While disc degeneration is a natural part of the aging process, it may also result from continued injury to the back. These injuries generally develop over a long period of time from activities that push the disc space together.

STEP 1

Degenerative disc disease generally begins with an injury to a cushioning disc in the spine. Small tears appear in the disc wall (annulus).

STEP 2

The tears heal, creating scar tissue that is not as strong as the original disc wall. The process of tearing and scarring may continue, weakening the disc wall.

STEP 3

After some time, the nucleus of the disc becomes damaged and loses some of its water content. This center is called the pulposus, and its water content is needed to keep it functioning as a shock absorber for the spine.

STEP 4

Unable to act as a cushion, the nucleus collapses. The vertebral bone above and below this damaged disc draw closer together. This twists the spine's facet joints.

STEP 5

In time, this awkward positioning of the vertebra may create bone spurs. If these spurs grow into the spinal canal, they may pinch the spinal cord and nerves (a condition called spinal stenosis).

COMMON SYMPTOMS

Pain may be felt in the back around the site of the injury. Strong pain tends to come and go. Bending, twisting and sitting may make the pain worse. Lying down relieves pressure on the spine.

