

Osteopathy and Disc Bulges

What is a Disc Bulge?

The intervertebral discs are found between the vertebrae of the spine and act as “shock-absorbers”, distributing the forces placed on the spine during activity, such as walking, lifting, etc. The older we become, the more brittle the discs become by drying out and hardening, making them more prone to injury. The term “slipped disc” is misleading so instead you will hear your Osteopath say disc bulge. The disc doesn't actually move out of place, but the tough outer fibers of the spinal disc weaken and stretch or tear allowing the “jelly like centre” of the disc to bulge outwards.

The disc bulge may compress or “pinch” the spinal nerve which sits close to the discs, and as a result irritates the nerve, perhaps leading to sharp or dull pain into the arms or legs, pins or needles and numbness, or perhaps weakness of the limb/s. In more serious cases, sharp shooting pain down the leg, even into the foot, may be experienced, known as **sciatica**.

Typically these symptoms will appear suddenly after you may have lifted something heavy or twisted in an awkward manner.

Is it serious?

The answer is yes and no. Interestingly, between 30-60% of disc bulges that are diagnosed on an MRI scan are actually asymptomatic – meaning they cause no pain or create other symptoms.

Keeping this in mind, the diagnosis of a disc bulge is not one to be taken lightly. If not careful, a disc bulge can worsen quite considerably, and further complications may occur. The most important thing to remember is that you can recover from the low back and leg pain cause by a disc herniation as a lot of the initial symptoms are a result of inflammation to the new site of injury. The latest research demonstrates that 60% of disc bulges will become asymptomatic within 6 weeks of initial injury, and that 80% of disc bulges will become asymptomatic within 12 weeks. Thus, disc bulges will improve and get better – it just takes time and the right management.

What will my Osteopath do to help treat a disc bulge?

As disc bulges a very common, our Osteopaths at Hampton St Osteopathy treat such conditions regularly. The aim of Osteopathic treatment is to firstly decrease the inflammation that surrounds the disc bulge, and secondly improve mobility of the spine in order to try to decrease the pressure surrounding the disc bulge. This can be done successfully by soft-tissue massage, gentle articulation and mobilization of the joints of the spine and stretching of the muscles in spasm surrounding the spine.

By improving mobility and decreasing the inflammation, a disc bulge will have a better chance in healing at a quicker rate.