

Cervical Radiculopathy

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Situation: Cervical radiculopathy is a general diagnosis to describe pain from the irritation of the nerves that originate in the neck which innervate—or *supply*—the shoulder, arms, upper back, forearms and hands. When interference at the nerve root occur—either from injury or irritation—symptoms will be demonstrated in one or all of these areas. Nerve root irritations or injury can occur from several tissues and conditions.

Causes: There are three primary causes of cervical radiculopathy . . . disc herniation, degenerative disc disease, and degenerative joint disease.

- Herniation of a disc in the neck begins with small tears that create a fragile site within the disc wall. This weakness allows the material of the nucleus to leak into the disc wall where sensitive nerve receptors are concentrated. This leaking fluid can cause localized neck pain, muscle ache, stiffness and headaches. If enough material leaks out, the disc can become deformed, causing the compression of spinal nerves or the spinal cord. This pressure can result in an array of symptoms including radiating pain, tingling and loss of function on one or both sides of the body.
- Degenerative disc disease is a gradual collapse of the intervertebral discs, causing the bones of the spine . . . also called the *vertebrae* . . . to slide closer together and misalign. This misalignment causes compression of the nerve root producing localized pain, as well as radiating pain from the neck.
- Degenerative joint disease starts when the facet joints of your spinal column become misaligned stressed or damaged. This misalignment and damage causes the joint capsule that surrounds the facet joint to lose fluid which allows the cartilage of the facet joint to rub painfully together. Over time the friction creates small bone spurs in and around the facet joint. Pain from degenerative joint disease can vary depending on how much damage has been done to the joint. Persistent stiffness, achiness and headaches are common. In advanced cases referral pain may occur in the upper back and shoulders.
- *Subluxation* is the chiropractic term that describes a condition when the flow of information through the nerves is interrupted or blocked due to a misalignment of the spinal column within the spinal canal. When this occurs, many functions of the body can become compromised and painful, often leading to even more significant conditions.

Symptoms: Cervical radiculopathy causes discomfort in several referral patterns, depending on which condition is involved and at what level of the spine. Most often the last three of seven vertebrae are involved, C5, C6 and C7. Symptoms can include neck pain, stiffness, weakness or tingling. Here is a picture to show the respective referral pain patterns. The C5 nerve pattern impacts the upper back, shoulder and arms, while the C6 extends over the upper back, shoulder, arm to the first two digits of the hand. The C7 extends over the upper back, back of shoulder, top of hand and third digit. Remember in most cases only one side is affected.

Treatment: Treatment options can include chiropractic care, acupuncture, physical therapy, and massage therapy. Your chiropractor will help determine which treatments are appropriate for your specific condition. The doctor might also order special testing such as an x-ray or MRI.