

## How can Osteopathy help?

The first thing to accept is that discs take time to ease. In this hectic modern life we lead, where we can get anything we want quickly, tissues take time to heal and all you can do is try and help them heal faster. Although seemingly impossible for some and difficult for most, rest in the early stages is essential. At this stage your osteopath can check and ease surrounding joints and gently ease tight muscles to get as much pressure as possible off the injured disc.

Heat is often helpful. Either warm hot water bottles, wheat bags or heat patches can help.

It is also important to encourage the pumping effect in the disc by making sure the vertebral joints aren't restricted and are moving. Treatment allows materials to move in and out of the disc and the fluids to diffuse in and around the disc helping recovery.

As symptoms improve and patients can move around for longer between resting, gentle mobility exercises can be started. The muscles are still tight and protective so still respond to heat and gentle stretches.

It is too early for strengthening exercises. A common mistake is to start these too early. The muscles are tight, they are not relaxed and working hard, they can't be strengthened until the disc has recovered and the muscles relax.

This is the time to start Physiotherapy, Yoga or Pilates to increase core strength around the neck and upper back.



Established in its present location in Shaw, Newbury and in the Hungerford doctors surgery in the Croft since 1994. The clinic has operated in the Newbury and Hungerford area since 1990.

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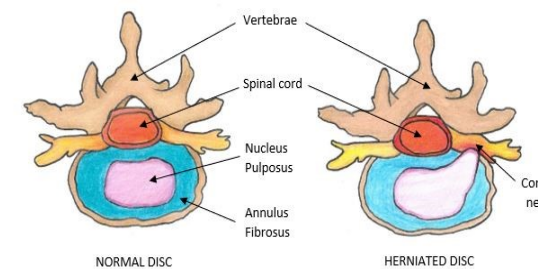
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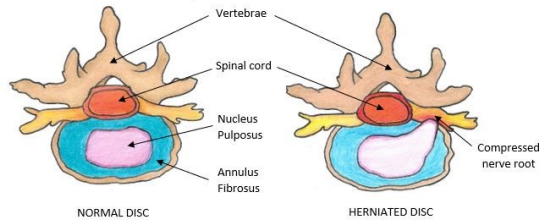
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## Osteopathy

### Cervical disc problems



## Disc Anatomy



Discs act like shock absorbers between the vertebrae of the spine. They consist of a tougher outer layer, the Anulus and a softer inner layer, the nucleus. The term slipped disc, herniated disc and prolapsed disc are often used interchangeably between specialists and it is tricky to know what you are dealing with clinically without MRI scans and often bear no relation to the amount of pain you may be suffering.

When discs protrude to the left or right, they may encroach on a nerve as it leaves the spinal canal. Typically, the most frequent disc affected is the C6/C7 disc, at the base of the neck. The next most frequent is the C5/C6 disc. If these discs push on nerves exiting behind them, the Brachial nerves, then you will start to feel pain in the shoulder or arm, known as brachialgia. Depending on where you feel the pain in your arm depends on the nerve that is being affected but doesn't always tell us which disc is causing it.

Brachialgia pain can be excruciating, is often accompanied with numbness or tingling (paraesthesia), hot or cold sensations or just a deep achy feeling. All or some of the fingers and thumb can be affected. Increased nerve pressure can cause muscular weakness in the arm and hand.

If discs protrude more centrally, a stenosis, you may feel pain into arms or even both legs. This is a much more serious condition and may require a more urgent treatment. Spinal cord compression symptoms can also include awkwardness or stumbling when walking or difficulty with fine, delicate movements in the hands and arms. This may be an emergency situation and you should call an ambulance or get to your local hospital urgently.

## How do disc problems occur?

Discs do not have a great blood supply with vessels mainly supplying the outer layers of the anulus. Discs rely on the slight pumping effect of vertebral movement and fluids diffusing in and out of the disk to maintain a healthy disc. It can therefore take up to 24 to 36 hours for inflammation and pain to start and disc symptoms to appear. It is the same reason disc problems can take a long time to settle.

Most patients therefore can't remember a particular cause although some do recall a slight twinge at the time. Not all disc protrusions are caused by bending and lifting and most do not have an acute onset. Often discs are aggravated over many years and are associated with repetitive physical tasks, like carrying and lifting or just by sitting badly in sofas or at the desk. Disc problems can result from physical injury and accidents like whiplash, often years before or poor posture. This does not even have to be over many years, it can occur quickly and suddenly. Often disc problems are age related and can be associated with increasing recurrent episodes of worsening neck pain. These patients often describe their neck pain occurring more frequently, becoming more severe and lasting longer. They may or may not have associated brachialgia pain in the shoulder or arm.

Patients are often better lying down, sleep can be unaffected and they can wake often without pain in the morning. It often feels like it has eased. Pain increases when they get up and try and get going and in a majority of cases is often aggravated standing and generally gets worse through the day. It is not unusual to feel pain around the top of the shoulder blade.

## Why is my disk not mending?

The poor blood supply to the disc is also the reason discs take a long time to ease. It takes a long time for the damaged material to leave the disc and a long time for the new material to get inside the disc. Most discs do however get better with time and a lot of patience. Most patients make the mistake of not resting the disc in the early stages, they try and carry on as usual with sitting and walking and wonder why they aren't getting better and even getting worse! They then start mobility exercises and strengthening exercises to early, often aggravating the disc more. Often anti-inflammatory medication slows the healing down.

## How can I help get better ?

Contrary to modern medicine, the biggest thing to try is rest, often for two to three weeks initially, not days, especially when symptoms start in the arm. Rest. Lie down. Rest for 30-60 minutes on your back with a pillow under your knees or on your side with your knees bent. Use pillows to get your neck in a comfortable position. Then get up and move around. Initially the pain will return quickly. Lie down again. When upright your discs are taking the weight of your head and this is reduced lying down. This is why discs are better at night and worse standing and through the day. Over a week or so you will find you can move around for longer periods before having to lie down again but, as soon as your neck and/or arm starts to hurt lie down again for 30-60 minutes to off load the disc again. Gradually over a few weeks you will find you can move around for a few hours, perhaps getting to mid morning, then lunch time. Eventually you will get to lunch time and into the early to late afternoon. You will still have to rest when the pain in the neck or arm hurts but the pain will be easing, you will moving around at this stage more than you are resting. Patience, patience, patience. It is frustrating but it will heal given time. Discs can take at least 3 to 6 months to heal., often longer. Strengthening a neck can take 18 months.

In the meantime, over the weeks, as the neck is easing, the brachialgia pain, in a majority of cases is moving down the arm away from the neck, which feels looser, towards the hand eventually reaching the fingers which may remain tingly for many weeks.