

DISC PROBLEMS and Osteopathy

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The aim of this small leaflet is to explain to you something about spinal disc problems and how osteopathy can help.

The spine is composed of building blocks of bone (Vertebrae) which are stacked on top of each other and held together very firmly with ligaments and moved by strong muscles. Between each vertebra, except the top two in the neck, is a shock absorber called an 'intervertebral disc' which cannot "slip" or "come out" despite the terminology which is often used.

A disc is composed of an outer series of criss-cross rings of cartilage (the annulus fibrosis) which is very strong, and an inner fluid portion (the nucleus pulposus), this latter acting a little bit like a ball bearing. Each disc absorbs fluid from surrounding tissues overnight thus lengthening the spine and stretching everything out, hence, in the morning, you may feel stiff but are also about half an inch taller.

Lying at the back part of each vertebra is a central tube which contains the spinal cord, which is the means by which nerve messages are passed to and from the brain. Different nerves emanate from the spinal cord between each vertebra and pass or receive messages to and from the limbs and the rest of the body.

Now, although each disc is very strong, sustained pressure, usually from incorrect posture or prolonged strain on the back, may cause some outer fibres to weaken and result in the nucleus bulging outwards, protruding more and more until eventually it hits one of the nerves which come from the spinal cord. The result is pain, pins and needles, numbness or weakness wherever that nerve happens to be going. If, for example, a disc at the very base of your spine is protruding, it might be rubbing against the nerve that goes right down to your foot and toes so that, although you feel the sensations in your foot, the problem is actually coming from your lower back.



A disc receives very little in the way of blood supply and consequently the healing process is much slower, but with care, recovery can be very satisfactory.

Your Osteopath will be trying to increase the rate at which the disc recovers, by reducing muscle spasm and improving the range and quality of movements of the spine. Disc injuries can be very painful, so your Osteopath will also be endeavouring to decrease this pain level and so make your recovery that more comfortable.

There are, of course, varying degrees of disc problems with the most extreme cases sometimes needing surgery, but this is usually a last option and the vast majority never needing such intervention. Your Osteopath will be able to advise you on such things as bed rest (if necessary), postural adjustments and exercise, and any other way in which recovery can be speeded up and maintained.

If you have any further questions regarding Osteoarthritis that have not been covered here, or in fact anything to do with how Osteopathy could help you, then please feel free to ring either of the practices to speak to one of the Osteopaths in attendance.