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## Degenerative Disk Disease

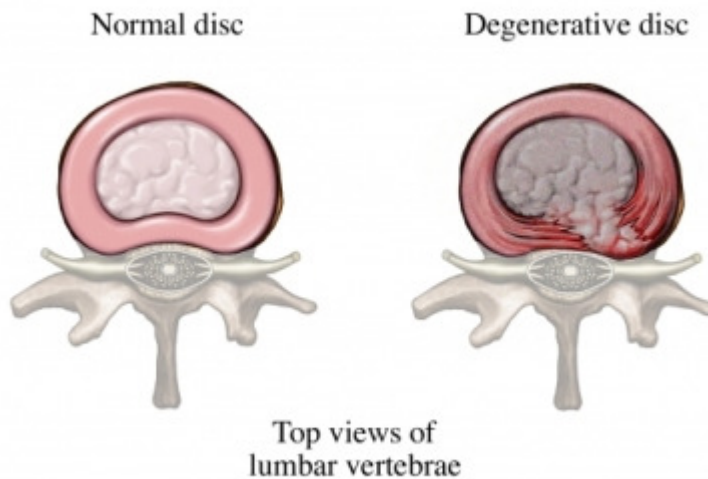
by Krisha McCoy, MS

### Definition

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Disks lie between the spinal bones (vertebra). They serve as shock absorbers. This protects the spine and helps it stay flexible. Degenerative disk disease is wear and tear on the disks. This wear and tear causes pain and other symptoms. Most people have some degeneration in disks as they age. Not all degeneration will result in symptoms of this disease.

### Degenerative Disk



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### Causes

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The disk is usually dehydrated, and not as resilient as normal. The fibrous tissue, which holds the disk material in place, may suffer small tears. These tears lead to further damage. There is some evidence that genetics may play a part for some people.

## Risk Factors

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The following factors may increase your risk of degenerative disk disease:

- Age: 30s or 40s
- Family history of degenerative disk disease
- Athletic activity
- Back injury

## Symptoms

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Symptoms of degenerative disk disease include:

- Pain in the low back, buttocks, thighs, or neck
- Pain that worsens when sitting, bending, lifting, or twisting
- Pain that feels better when walking, changing positions, or lying down
- Periods of severe pain that gets better after a few days or months
- Numbness and tingling into the legs
- Weakness in the legs
- Foot drop (inability to raise the foot at the ankle)

## Diagnosis

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Your doctor will ask about your symptoms and medical history. A physical exam will be done.

Other tests may include:

- Blood and/or urine tests to rule out other causes of pain
- MRI scan —a test that uses magnetic waves to make pictures of structures inside the body
- X-ray —a test that uses radiation to take a picture of structures inside the body, especially the bones
- Discography —dye is injected into the affected spinal area to get clearer x-ray images

## Treatment

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Talk with your doctor about the best plan for you. Treatment options include:

### Physical Therapy

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Therapy for this condition is focused on teaching you how to manage your back pain. This may involve:

- Posture training
- Exercise
- Ice packs
- Heating
- Electrical stimulation

Relaxation  
Other forms of physical therapy

## Injections

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Steroid injections may be used for some short term pain relief. They are injected around the nerves exiting the spinal cord.

## Surgery

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Surgery may be required for some. Surgery may involve removing the degenerated disk and fusing two of the vertebra together.

## Prevention

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Take the following steps to help protect your spine:

Begin a safe exercise program with the advice of your doctor.

Maintain a healthy weight.

If you have osteoporosis, follow your doctor's instructions for treating the condition.

### RESOURCES:

American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons

<http://orthoinfo.aaos.org/>

North American Spine Society

<http://www.spine.org/>

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