



CONDITION

What causes Neck Pain?

The nerves that supply your arms travel from your spinal cord to your arm between your neck bones. Nerve symptoms in your arm can sometimes arise from these nerves being pinched or damaged in the neck.

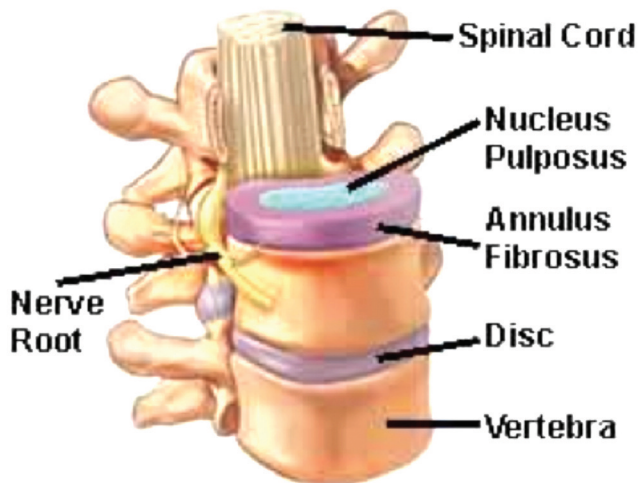


Diagram of Part of the Neck

What sort of neck problems can give rise to arm symptoms?

The spine is a complex structure but the commonest problems in the neck that give rise to nerve symptoms in the arm are arthritis and bulging discs. A little description of the structure of the neck is necessary here to try and explain this.

Arthritis in the neck can occur between any of the moving parts. As the arthritis progresses the space between the moving parts sometimes becomes narrow. This narrowing can pinch the nerves as they come out between the bones and give rise to symptoms in the arms.

The soft discs sit between each bony vertebra. In some people the soft tissue of the disc can bulge out more than it usually should between the vertebrae. If this bulge comes out of the back of the vertebrae it may press on the spinal cord. If it comes out of the sides it may press on the nerve roots. Either of these two possibilities may result in nerve symptoms in the arm

What symptoms can you get with these neck problems?

Symptoms are quite variable but can include patches of abnormal sensation in the arm, pain radiating down the arm and weakness of the arm muscles. If the spinal cord is severely affected the nerves going further down to the legs can also be affected. Symptoms often start very gradually but occasionally they may come on suddenly and severely.

What is the treatment for this sort of neck problem?

In the vast majority of people these sort of neck problems are a nuisance but can be controlled with simple measures such as protecting the neck, exercises and painkillers. In a small number of patients targeted injections in specialist clinics are required. Surgery is only necessary if the symptoms are very severe. You will be referred onto another specialist if your hand surgeon feels your neck is the main source of your arm symptoms.

How is the diagnosis confirmed?

Knowledge of what each nerve does in the arm is necessary to work out whether or not your symptoms are likely to be coming from your neck or from elsewhere. This requires your surgeon to listen to your symptoms and carefully examine how your nerves are working in each part. Further tests, such as electrical tests of the nerves, xrays and MRI scans might be helpful in sorting out where the problem is coming from.