

What a Pain in the Neck! Managing Cervical Arthritis

With Han Jo Kim, MD
HSS Orthopedic Spine Surgeon

Several conditions in the neck (cervical spine) can cause pain and other symptoms and limit your mobility. Innovative techniques are available to restore your function, relieve your symptoms, and improve your quality of life.



What Is Causing Your Neck Pain?

The vertebrae in your neck are separated by cushioning discs and facet joints. When arthritis progresses in these spaces, it can cause herniated discs or bone spurs that compress nerve roots or the spinal cord and can lead to:

- **Cervical myelopathy:** compression of the spinal cord in the neck
- **Cervical radiculopathy:** a nerve in the neck is pinched in an area where it branches away from the spinal cord
- **Cervical spondylosis:** arthritis with bone-on-bone contact and erosion of cartilage in a facet joint

Your surgeon will consider your symptoms, the alignment of the bones in your neck, and areas of compression when choosing the most effective treatment for your neck pain.

What You Might Feel

These problems may cause:

- neck pain that radiates down the arm
- numbness or tingling
- weakness in the muscles of the arms and hands
- problems with balance as well as using your hands and fingers to grasp objects
- pain when moving or rotating your neck
- in severe cases, problems with bowel and bladder function

Relief Without Surgery

Nonsurgical treatments such as physical therapy, steroid injections, traction, massage therapy, and posture corrections may be helpful to treat neck pain. If these treatments are not enough, a variety of surgical approaches are available to relieve your symptoms.

How Surgery Can Help You Feel Better

There are two general types of neck surgery: techniques to fuse the affected vertebrae, and non-fusion techniques to free spinal cord or nerve compression. They may be performed from the front or back of your neck.

- **Fusion surgeries:** The surgeon may remove a bone spur or herniated disc that is causing compression and fuse the vertebrae using bone cement and screws or rods. Some people with cervical arthritis may have the vertebrae fused to reduce the bone-on-bone friction causing their symptoms.
- **Non-fusion surgeries:**
 - disc replacement
 - foraminotomy (creating more room in a vertebra for a nerve root to pass through)
 - laminectomy (relieving pressure on the spinal cord and nerves by removing bone)
 - laminoplasty (removing pressure on the spinal cord)