

Back Surgery for Spinal Stenosis: Before Your Surgery

Your spine is basically a long stack of bones.

These stacked bones are called vertebrae.

The vertebrae are also cushioned by small, spongy discs that protect your spine and keep it flexible.

Each bone, or vertebra, has a hole in the middle.

This area is called the spinal canal.

The spinal canal also has little openings on the sides.

These openings are called foramina.

Your spinal cord runs through the spinal canal.

Nerves that branch off from the spinal cord run through the foramina on the sides of each vertebra.

The lamina, a part of the vertebrae, helps protect the spinal cord inside the spinal canal.

When you have spinal stenosis in your back, it can get crowded inside the spinal canal or in the openings on the sides of each vertebra.

Bone, discs, or other tissue can push into the canal and can put pressure on your spinal cord or on the nerves where they exit out of the foramina.

These nerves extend to other areas of your body.

That's why you may hurt or feel weakness in places other than in your back.

A back surgery— called a laminectomy— can treat the pain or weakness by removing the lamina to create space inside the spinal canal and inside the foramina.

Here's how a laminectomy is done.

Before and during the surgery, you will get medicine so you won't feel any pain. The doctor will make a cut—an incision— over your spine.

And the doctor will take out some of the lamina to make room for the spinal cord and nerves.

The doctor may also trim thickened tissue, such as bulging discs.

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Sometimes the doctor may then do another type of surgery, called a spinal fusion.

This can involve using plates and screws to keep the bones in place.

The doctor may use small pieces of bone from another part of your body, artificial bone, or bone that has been donated from another person.

To finish the surgery, your incisions will be closed with a bandage and stitches, staples, skin glue, or tape strips.

Before the surgery, tell your doctor about all the medicines and natural health products you take, especially blood thinners, like aspirin.

Some can raise the risk of bleeding or cause problems with anesthesia.

Your doctor will tell you which medicines to take or stop before surgery.

And follow your doctor's directions for preparing for your surgery, including when you should stop eating and drinking.

Bring your photo ID, health insurance card, and any paperwork your hospital may have asked for.

Be sure you have someone to take you home.

Anesthesia and pain medicine will make it unsafe for you to drive or get home on your own.

And you may need someone to help you at home for a few days or weeks or until you have more energy and can move around better.

The thought of having back surgery may be stressful, but knowing what to expect and how to prepare can help.

If you have any questions or concerns, you can always call your doctor.