



Battle of the Bulge: Disc Bulges and Back Pain

Why a bulging disc is not always the villain it looks like

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Few phrases cause more alarm in a radiology report than "disc bulge." But disc bulges are extremely common, and in most people, they cause no pain at all.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Disc bulges are extremely common and often appear in pain-free people, especially with age.
- A bulge alone does not confirm that it is the cause of your pain.
- Treatment should follow how well the exam and symptoms match the imaging, not the report alone.

THE FULL PICTURE

Studies of pain-free adults consistently find disc bulges on MRI at high rates, increasing steadily with age. By a person's 40s and 50s, some degree of disc bulging is closer to normal aging than to disease, similar to gray hair or fine lines. A disc bulge is a change in the shape of the disc, distinct from a herniation, which involves disc material actually breaking through its outer layer, and distinct again from a herniation that is compressing a nerve root, which is far more likely to correlate with symptoms.

This creates a common trap: someone with back pain gets an MRI, sees the words "disc bulge," and assumes that is the explanation, when the same bulge might be sitting quietly in thousands of pain-free spines. Anchoring treatment entirely to that finding can lead to unnecessary procedures aimed at a structure that was never actually the problem.

The more useful question is not whether a bulge is present, but whether the exam findings, the pattern of pain, and any nerve-related symptoms like numbness, weakness, or radiating leg pain line up with that specific level and side.

When they do, the bulge is a meaningful lead. When they do not, it may simply be a passenger. Either way, treatment should follow the clinical picture, not the report alone.

This handout is for general patient education and does not replace individualized medical advice. Discuss your specific diagnosis and treatment options with your physician.

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