

What Are the Symptoms of a Herniated Disc After a Crash?

A Palm Beach Gardens car accident lawyer who fights for maximum compensation

A [car accident](#) can injure your spine in a matter of seconds. In the chaos that follows a collision, it's tempting to write off the aching in your neck or the stiffness in your lower back as nothing more than the shock your body just absorbed. But some of what you're feeling may be pointing to something far more serious.

A herniated disc is one of the most commonly missed crash injuries, and the gap between "I'm probably just sore" and "I should have seen a doctor days ago" can close before you even realize it's happening. Knowing what this injury actually feels like, and why it sometimes takes time to reveal itself, is an important part of your car accident claim.

What causes a herniated disc in a car accident?

Your spine is built around a column of vertebrae stacked on top of each other, with rubbery discs sitting between them to absorb shock and keep things moving smoothly. Each disc has a tough outer layer and a softer, gel-like center. When crash forces push those structures past their limits, the outer shell can crack or tear, letting that inner material press outward and into surrounding tissue. That's a herniation.

The type of crash matters. For example:

- [Rear-end collisions](#) (the most common) create a rapid whipping motion in the neck that places enormous stress on the cervical discs.
- [Head-on collisions](#) tend to compress the spine vertically, which makes lumbar injuries in the lower back more likely.
- [T-bone and side-impact crashes](#) cause lateral forces the spine simply isn't built to manage, and the thoracic discs in the mid-back often take the hit.
- **Low-speed collisions** and fender benders can still generate enough force to damage spinal discs, particularly if you have any pre-existing disc wear that made those structures more vulnerable to begin with.

What does a herniated disc actually feel like?

A herniated disc doesn't always announce itself the same way in every person. The symptoms depend heavily on where in the spine the herniation occurred and which nerve roots are being affected. That said, there are some patterns worth knowing.

Pain at the site of the injury

Pain is usually the first thing people notice. It can show up as a dull, persistent ache at the site of the injury, or it can radiate outward along the path of the affected nerve. That radiating pain

is often described as burning, stabbing, or feeling like an electric shock shooting down the arm or leg.

If the herniation is in your lower back, you may feel it travel through your buttock, down the back of your thigh, and all the way into your foot (a pattern most people know as sciatica). Pain that spikes when you cough, sneeze, or shift your position in a certain way is also a common complaint.

Numbness and tingling

When a herniated disc presses against a nerve root, it can disrupt sensation in the areas that nerve supplies. Cervical herniations in the neck often produce numbness or pins-and-needles sensations in the shoulders, arms, hands, or fingers. Lumbar herniations lower down frequently cause those same sensations in the thighs, calves, and feet. Some people describe it as the feeling of a limb that's fallen asleep — except it doesn't wake back up.

Muscle weakness

You might notice difficulty gripping things, trouble lifting your arm above your head, or a heaviness in your legs when walking or climbing stairs. In more serious lumbar cases, something called foot drop can develop, where you lose the ability to lift the front of your foot properly when you walk. These kinds of functional changes are important to pay attention to, because they suggest the disc is pressing on motor nerves, not just sensory ones.

Stiffness and limited range of motion

Your muscles will often go into a protective spasm around an injured disc, locking down movement in an attempt to prevent further damage. That can make it painful to turn your head, bend forward, or straighten up fully. The stiffness from a disc injury tends to feel more mechanical and persistent than the general soreness you'd expect from bruised muscles.

Why do some herniated disc symptoms take days to appear?

After trauma, your body releases adrenaline and cortisol, which can mask pain so effectively that you don't feel the full extent of your injuries right away. Add to that the fact that inflammation around the disc and surrounding nerve tissue builds gradually over the first 24 to 72 hours, and you have symptoms that can feel minor at first and then worsen significantly over the following days.

In some cases, disc material that was partially displaced during the crash can continue to migrate in the days or weeks afterward, with symptoms following its movement. It's not uncommon for someone to feel stiff but manageable after a crash, only to wake up a week later barely able to get out of bed.

This delayed presentation creates real problems beyond the medical ones. [Insurance companies](#) often use a gap in symptoms or a delay in seeking treatment as a reason to question whether

the crash actually caused the injury. Seeing a doctor promptly after any collision (even if you feel okay) is one of the most important things you can do for both your health and any potential claim.

What are the warning signs that need immediate attention?

Most herniated disc symptoms, while painful and disruptive, aren't medical emergencies. But some red flags mean you should go to an emergency room right away, not schedule an appointment for next week. Go immediately if you experience any of the following:

- **Loss of bladder or bowel control:** This can indicate cauda equina syndrome, a serious condition where disc material compresses the bundle of nerve roots at the base of the spine that controls those functions.
- **Numbness or loss of sensation in the inner thighs, groin, or perineal area:** Sometimes called saddle anesthesia, this symptom frequently accompanies cauda equina syndrome and should be treated as an emergency.
- **Sudden severe weakness in both legs:** This can signal spinal cord involvement and requires immediate evaluation.
- **Rapidly spreading numbness or loss of coordination:** If you're having difficulty walking or your symptoms are progressing quickly, don't wait to monitor them at home.

How is a herniated disc diagnosed and treated after a crash?

A doctor will typically begin with a physical and neurological exam, where they test your reflexes, muscle strength, and sensation in different areas to pinpoint which nerve roots might be affected. Orthopedic tests such as the straight leg raise can help confirm nerve root irritation.

From there, imaging takes over. X-rays are useful for ruling out fractures and checking spinal alignment, but they don't show disc tissue. An MRI is the gold standard for diagnosing herniated discs; it provides a clear picture of the disc, the surrounding soft tissue, and whether any nerve roots are being compressed.

CT scans offer a good look at bony structures and are used when MRI isn't an option. In some cases, electromyography (EMG) and nerve conduction studies are ordered to confirm whether nerve function is actually being disrupted.

Most people with a herniated disc don't end up needing surgery. Treatment typically starts conservatively and escalates only if needed:

- **Rest and activity modification:** Avoid movements that aggravate symptoms while staying as mobile as pain allows.
- **Physical therapy:** Core strengthening, posture correction, and nerve mobilization are central to recovery.
- **Medications:** Anti-inflammatories, muscle relaxants, and nerve pain drugs help manage symptoms.

- **Epidural steroid injections:** These reduce inflammation around the compressed nerve root and can provide meaningful relief.
- **Surgery:** Considered when conservative treatment fails or neurological symptoms are progressing. A microdiscectomy is the most common approach for lumbar cases.

Should I consult with a lawyer if I sustained a herniated disc in a crash?

If you were hurt in a car accident in Florida, don't hesitate to seek help from an experienced Palm Beach Gardens attorney at [The Law Offices of Casey D. Shomo, P.A.](#) Insurance adjusters are trained to argue that your disc injury is the result of pre-existing degeneration rather than the crash, that your symptoms are exaggerated, or that you waited too long to seek care. Without an attorney who understands how to counter those arguments with the right medical evidence and expert support, you can easily walk away with far less than your injury actually warrants. The stakes are too high to navigate that alone.

Our law firm has spent over 30 years representing car accident victims in Palm Beach Gardens and throughout South Florida, and we've recovered more than \$85 million for clients dealing with exactly these kinds of serious, life-disrupting injuries. There's no risk to you when you consult with us. Getting answers costs you nothing upfront, and we only get paid if we win your case.

If you suffered a herniated disc in a car accident in Florida, [contact us online](#) or call to schedule your free consultation. Don't let the insurance company write the ending to your story.