

Nerve Irritation After OLLIF Surgery

You may notice after your surgery that you have left lower extremity symptoms. When your surgeon consented you for surgery, they explained that there is a 15% chance of this happening. In our consent forms we use the number 15%. However, after a surgeon becomes consistently proficient at performing the OLLIF approach, the risk of nerve root irritation is most likely lower. To put this number into perspective for you, when compared to traditional open approaches such as the TLIF and PLIF, the risk of nerve root irritation corresponding to an OLLIF case was in our initial study 50% less.

What causes this?

This nerve irritation is caused from your nerve being moved during your surgery. This is more likely to happen in the levels of L5/S1 than any other level. If you had nerve irritation prior to surgery, you are more likely to have increased nerve irritation after surgery. In order for your surgeon to gain the best access to the area of your spine that needs to be corrected, they must gently move the nerve away from the approach. After your surgery, the nerve irritation is caused by inflammation and swelling near the nerve. Your surgeon will most likely always use a left sided approach for an OLLIF surgery; this is why the nerve irritation is located in your left lower extremity.

Why did I not have this pain right away after surgery?

Sometimes symptoms start 3-7 days after surgery and you may notice an increase in the nerve irritation. During your surgery your surgeon put a steroid injection into your surgical area to help with pain relief. Around 3-7 days after your surgery the steroid wears off. This is why you may feel great when you leave the hospital, but experience increased pain after a few days. Also, patients typically start to increase their activity once they get home, which also causes increased inflammation and swelling in your surgical area.

What symptoms may I have?

- Increased nerve pain in the left lower extremity. Most commonly noticed along the posteriolateral aspect of the thigh, anterior aspect of the calf and the top of the foot.
- Feeling of “electric shocks”, “zapping” or “shooting pain” running down the leg. These symptoms are a sign that your nerves are starting the healing process. They may start 4-8 weeks after surgery get worse at first then improve.
- These symptoms typically last for 4 to 8 weeks after surgery. It is rare that these symptoms will last for longer than a few months.

What can I do to relieve the pain?

- This type of nerve pain typically responds well to an epidural steroid injection (ESI). An epidural steroid injection is commonly prescribed to help relieve the swelling and inflammation in the area of your surgery.
- A Medrol dose pack and/or gabapentin may also be prescribed to help relieve your pain. However, gabapentin is typically not prescribed unless the nerve pain lasts longer than 2 weeks.

Conclusion:

The prognosis of nerve irritation is excellent after an OLLIF surgery. Again, the nerve irritation typically lasts around 4 to 8 weeks after surgery. It is rare that the nerve irritation does not get better within a few months.

It is common to have imaging done after your surgery. Typically, a CT is done at your one-month follow up after your surgery; however, sometimes a MRI may be ordered as well. Please note that post-operative changes noted on the imaging may be misunderstood as a complication of the surgery by a non-spine surgeon. It is always best to have your surgeon look at your imaging and explain to you what is shown.