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Neural Tension / Nerve Entrapment

Nerve cells are some of the longest cells in the body, they run like wires out from the spine to all areas of the body and limbs and are responsible for sensation and muscle activation. Because they are sensitive to being stretched or squashed, nerves need to be able to slide freely through the tissues when we move. Sometimes they can become trapped at some point along their course and result in pain or sensory disruptions such as pins and needles or numbness.

How does it happen?

Nerves are more likely to become caught up or irritated at certain points along their path. These include; where they pass through a muscle belly eg. buttock muscles (piriformis), where they pass through a soft tissue tunnel eg. wrist (carpal tunnel), where they branch out into separate strands eg. deep in the hamstring, where they pass close to bony prominences eg. elbow, where there is scar tissue (due to previous soft tissue trauma) or close to unstable or injured joints.

Symptoms

Symptoms may include pain, numbness, 'strange' sensations or pins and needles. There are some other features of the symptoms that are also different from musculoskeletal or mechanical pain. Symptoms may appear to move from one area to another, they may vary and seem to come and go at random, pain may also feel most intense in the middle of the night and increase during times of stress.

Management

Treatment technique will depend on the location and type of obstruction to the nerve's mobility. These may include; soft tissue release or massage, dry needling, heat, stretches, joint mobilisation, and/or splinting. You will also likely be shown how to perform 'neural mobilisation' exercises, these involve very gently tensioning and releasing the nerve in question. It is important that you follow your physiotherapists' instructions very carefully with regard to these exercises as doing too many or stretching too hard can make your condition worse. The aim of these exercises is to help the nerves slide easily within the tissues through which they pass.

What to expect

Unfortunately the course of these conditions tends to be somewhat variable, symptoms may clear up in 2-3 sessions over a week or two or conversely take up to 6-12 weeks to settle. Your physiotherapist will also try to identify movements or postures that are likely to aggravate your condition and you will be given instructions on how to avoid or modify these for a period of time.

Prognosis for nerve entrapment problems is generally very good, most people make a full recovery and are able to return to all their former activities.

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