

Introduction

A synovial cyst is a fluid-filled sac that can form in or near joints. These cysts can be in any joint, such as the knee, hip, shoulder, elbow, or wrist. A synovial cyst can also form in the spine, often in the lower part where there is a lot of movement. Spinal synovial cysts can press on nerves, cause pain, and reduce movement in the spine.

This reference summary explains spinal synovial cysts. It covers symptoms and causes, as well as diagnosis and treatment options.

The Spine

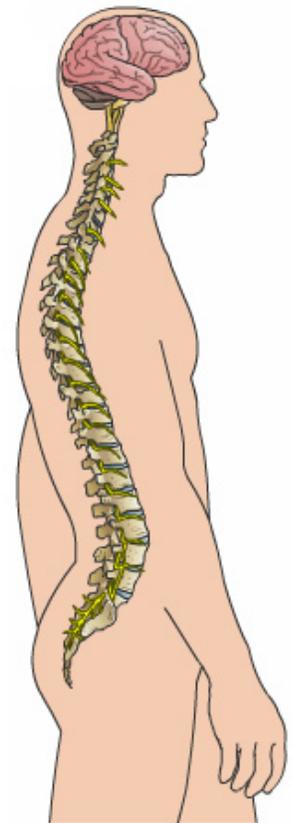
A synovial cyst is a fluid-filled sac that can form in or near joints. These cysts can be in any joint, such as the knee, hip, shoulder, elbow, or wrist. This program is about synovial cysts that form in the spine. This section reviews the anatomy of the spine.

The spine protects the spinal cord and nerves that go to different parts of the body. It extends from the bottom of the skull to the tailbone.

The spinal cord and nerves gather information from our arms, legs, chest, and back to send to the brain. This allows us to feel and touch.

The spinal cord and nerves allow the brain to send orders and messages to the muscles of the body. These messages result in our ability to breathe, move, and walk.

The spinal cord is located in the spine and is protected by vertebrae. Vertebrae are solid, bony structures. They are separated by soft disks that allow the spine to bend and twist.

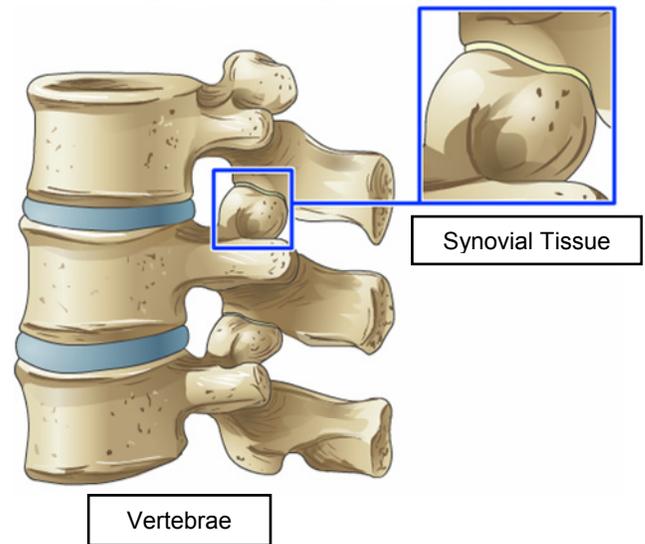


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Two joints link each two vertebrae. These are the facet joints. They are located toward the back and on both sides of the vertebrae.

Because of their shape and location, facet joints help prevent the slippage, or abnormal movement, of vertebrae. Facet joints also allow the vertebrae to move painlessly.

Synovial tissue is at the center of facet joints. The synovium produces a fluid that allows for painless movement. This fluid is called synovial fluid.



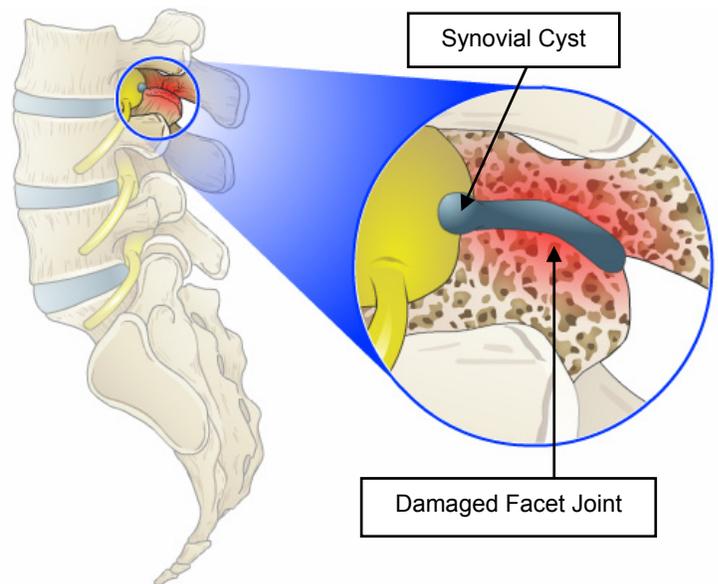
Causes

Spinal synovial cysts can form when the facet joints are damaged. This damage is often caused by certain diseases, such as arthritis. Arthritis is inflammation of a joint.

When the facet joints become damaged, they can no longer move as smoothly. The synovium makes up for this damage by producing more synovial fluid to protect the joint. Sometimes the extra fluid can either escape from the joint capsule or cause the synovium itself to overgrow its normal boundaries. In either case this creates a sac-like bulge, forming a synovial cyst.

Small synovial cysts often do not cause any problems. However, a synovial cyst may continue to grow as it fills with fluid. If a synovial cyst gets large enough, it can put pressure on nerves and other structures in the affected area of the spine. This can cause back and leg pain or weakness.

Most spinal synovial cysts are located in the lumbar spine, which is the lower part of the spine, since this area allows the most movement. More movement means more possibility for damage.



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Symptoms

Small spinal synovial cysts often do not cause any symptoms.

If a synovial cyst becomes large enough, it can press on the nerves in the spine. This can cause:

- Dull, aching pain in the back that may move down the legs
- Pain that is present or gets worse when walking or standing

A synovial cyst may also cause:

- Limited joint movement
- Numbness or weakness of the arms, chest, or legs
- Spine instability

Severe cases may also cause loss of control over the bowel or bladder. However, this is rare.

Often the symptoms caused by a spinal synovial cyst are relieved when sitting. This is because the spinal canal widens when you sit, reducing pressure on nerves.

As the facet joints get damaged, they may not be able to prevent the vertebrae from slipping out of place. This causes instability of the spine and also decreases movement of the spine.



Diagnosis

Your healthcare provider will first ask about your medical history and symptoms. He or she will also perform a physical exam.

If your healthcare provider suspects you may have a spinal synovial cyst, imaging tests may be done such as MRI and X-rays. An MRI can show if a synovial cyst is present and where in the spine it is located. An MRI uses strong magnets to create images of the inside of the body. You may receive contrast material by injection to make abnormal areas easier to see.



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X-rays are also used to show the amount of damage to the facet joints and any areas of instability in the spine. It is important for your doctor to know this information before deciding which treatment is best for you.

Imaging tests of the spine can also show if any other problems are causing your symptoms.

Treatment

Some people with small synovial cysts may not need treatment. These cysts may not interfere with daily activities or cause any symptoms.

Changing your level of activity and type of exercise may help some people with mild symptoms. Avoid activities that make your symptoms worse. Your healthcare provider can also tell you other ways to reduce your discomfort.

If you do not receive treatment, your healthcare provider may recommend regular imaging tests. These tests can show if the cyst is changing and requires treatment.

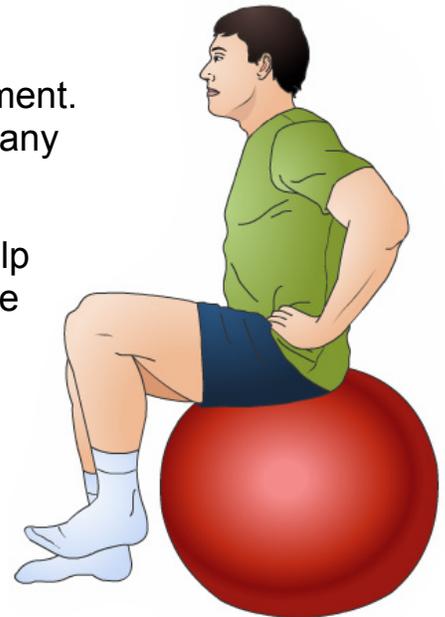
If treatment is needed, it may include:

- Injections
- Surgery

One possible treatment option is steroid injections. The steroid medication may be injected into the facet joint or the space surrounding the cyst. Steroids help decrease inflammation, which can reduce pain. This treatment does not help everyone and is often temporary.

If other treatments do not work or your symptoms are severe, a spinal synovial cyst can be treated with surgery. The goal of surgery is to remove the cyst.

In some cases, surgery may also involve fusing together the affected facet joints to increase stability in the spine. This also prevents cysts from reforming.



Steroid Injection

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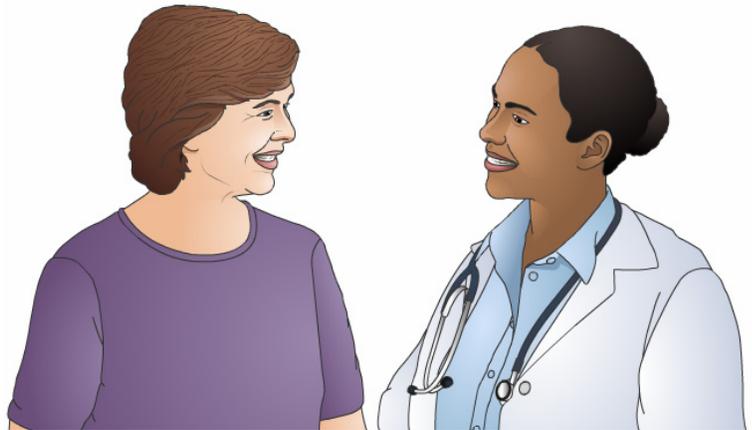
Talk to your doctor about your options and the risks and possible complications of each treatment. Your doctor can recommend which treatment option is best for you.

Summary

A synovial cyst is a fluid-filled sac that can form in or near joints. These cysts can be in any joint, such as the knee, hip, shoulder, elbow, or wrist.

A synovial cyst can also form in the spine, often in the lower, lumbar spine where there is a lot of movement. Spinal synovial cysts can press on nerves and cause weakness or pain. These cysts could cause vertebrae to slip and become unstable and can also reduce movement in the spine.

Small synovial cysts often do not cause any problems. However, a synovial cyst may continue to grow as the synovium produces more fluid. Some people with small synovial cysts may not need treatment. These cysts may not interfere with daily activities or cause any symptoms. Large synovial cysts in the spine may be treated by steroid injections or surgery.



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