

Syringomyelia

Syringomyelia occurs when a fluid-filled cyst develops within the spinal cord. Over the course of time, the cyst might end up getting bigger, causing pain and damage to the spinal cord, stiffness and weakness, as well as a number of other symptoms.

There are several possible causes of the condition, although the majority of instances are associated with a Chiari malformation, which is a condition where the brain tissue ends up protruding out of the spinal canal. Other common causes of the condition are spinal cord tumors, injuries to the spinal cord and damage resulting from inflammation around the spinal cord.

In most cases a syringomyelia will not cause any problems. If the condition isn't causing you any problems, you might need to do nothing more than monitor it. In most cases it is found on an MRI scan due to looking for other problems, like disc problems or mechanical problems with the spine. The presence of a syringomyelia is usually incidental. If you are bothered by the symptoms, you might have to undergo surgery, but this is risky and the majority of consultants will suggest you try other options such as physiotherapy before considering anything more invasive.

Syringomyelia is sometimes known as a syrinx.

Syringomyelia Anatomy

The spinal cord travels from the brain to the base of the spine. It's a thick cord of nerves that are grouped together and surrounded by a membrane. The spinal cord runs through the middle of the vertebrae, known as the spinal canal, and this helps to protect the spinal cord.

The syringomyelia is a bubble of fluid located in the spinal cord. Sometimes it can be very long and look quite dramatic. But looking bad does not necessarily mean it will be painful. The bubble/cyst is fluid filled with cerebro-spinal fluid – that's the fluid that nourishes the spinal cord and brain.



An MRI scan showing a syringomyelia or syrinx – it looks like a white bubble in the spinal cord

How to Treat Syringomyelia:

1. Monitoring

If the condition is found on an MRI scan that was completed for an unknown reason, and you aren't having any symptoms or signs, you might only need to be monitored with periodic neurological and MRI exams to follow the condition. In rare instances, a syrinx might end up resolving on its own without further treatment.

2. Surgery

If syringomyelia is causing symptoms and signs that are interfering with your regular life, or if symptoms and signs are gradually getting worse, surgery is often recommended. The main goal of surgery is to remove the pressure that the syrinx is placing on your spinal cord and help to restore the normal cerebrospinal fluid flow. The type of surgery required depends largely upon the main cause of the condition.

Tips:

- If the condition is causing ongoing problems neurologically that are decreasing your activities and mobility, a physical therapist can help to develop an exercise regimen that can reduce the symptoms.
- If you are suffering with chronic pain, you need to speak with the doctor to discuss various treatment options to help you manage your pain.
- Refrain from participating in any high-impact sports, such as rugby and football.
- Be cautious with any roller coasters as this only amplifies the problems in your spine.
- There is a higher prevalence of syringomyelia in the Indian population.