

SPINAL CORD STIMULATOR

A spinal cord stimulator (SCS) is a small device that helps manage chronic pain by sending low levels of electrical energy to the nerves near the spinal cord. Thin wires (leads) are placed in the epidural space around the spine, and a battery-powered generator (similar to a pacemaker) is implanted under the skin, usually in the buttock or abdomen. The device changes how pain signals are sent to the brain and can lessen the feeling of pain. Many systems use a handheld remote so you can turn the device on or off and adjust the settings within the range your provider programs.

Who Might Benefit

Spinal cord stimulators are generally considered for people with chronic pain that has not improved enough with other treatments such as medications, injections, physical therapy, or prior surgeries. Common conditions include ongoing back and/or leg pain after spine surgery ("failed back surgery syndrome"), certain nerve-related pain conditions (such as complex regional pain syndrome), diabetic or other neuropathic pain, and some types of chronic postoperative or vascular-related pain. SCS is usually one part of a larger pain management plan that may still include exercise, therapy, and other strategies.

Evaluation and Trial

Before offering a permanent spinal cord stimulator, your pain specialist will review your medical history, imaging, and prior treatments. If you are a candidate, the first step is typically a short "trial" procedure. During the trial, temporary leads are placed near the spinal cord and connected to an external device. You go home with the system for several days to see how much your pain improves and how well you tolerate the stimulation. If you get meaningful relief and are able to do more of your normal activities, you and your provider may decide to move forward with permanent implantation.

Treatment Options and Procedure

If the trial is successful, the permanent system is placed during an outpatient procedure. The leads are positioned in the epidural space, and the generator is implanted under the skin. The device is then programmed to provide stimulation patterns tailored to your pain. Over time, your provider can adjust the settings as needed to optimize relief.

Spinal cord stimulation does not "cure" the underlying problem, but for many patients it can reduce pain, improve sleep and daily function, and may allow a lower dose of pain medications. Studies suggest that some people experience a 50–70% reduction in pain when SCS is successful.

As with any surgery or implanted device, there are risks, including infection, bleeding, movement or breakage of the leads, hardware malfunction, or the possibility that the device does not provide enough relief over time.

Your pain specialist can help you decide whether SCS is appropriate for your specific condition, explain the trial process, and review the expected benefits and risks in more detail.

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