



About Syringomyelia

DEFINITION

Syringomyelia (seer-in-go-my-EEL-ya) occurs when a cavity, or syrinx, is formed inside the spinal cord from a build-up of fluid, which results from a blockage, either from a Chiari malformation (CM), spinal trauma, tumor, or other cause. Syringomyelia (SM) can cause stretching and, eventually, permanent injury to nerve fibers.

CAUSES

Often, SM is associated with CM. There is at least a partial blockage of normal cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) circulation in almost all cases of SM.

Obstruction of CSF flow is most commonly caused:

- by abnormalities in the base of the skull (CM) or in the spine
- from scar tissue after spinal injuries, spinal infections or spinal surgery
- arachnoid partitions (arachnoid cysts) which may be present from birth
- the presence of some tumors in the spinal cord

TREATMENT

Currently, the only effective treatment is surgery.

Aim of surgery: Decrease the size of the syrinx and relieve the symptoms of treating the cause of the syrinx: Chiari, tumor, etc. Occasionally, direct drainage of the syrinx is needed.

DIAGNOSTIC TESTS

MRI will indicate whether or not a patient has SM or any other abnormality. A "screening" MRI of the spine can establish a diagnosis of SM.

Three components for appropriate diagnosis and treatment of SM:

- patient's history of specific characteristic symptoms
- examination that shows signs consistent with SM
- head and spine MRI demonstrating characteristic anatomy of SM

COMMON SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

- Numbness
- Tingling
- Pain*
- Weakness*

*these symptoms occur particularly in the arms and legs

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