



Annular Tear (Annular Fissure): What It Means on Your MRI

One-page summary of the full Spinemathema guide. Scan the QR code for the full guide, with references and audio.

Key points

- An annular tear, now usually called an annular fissure, is a split in the tough outer ring of a spinal disc. It is one of the most common phrases on an MRI report of the lower back.
- It is often found in people with no back pain at all. In a large review of people without symptoms, it was seen in about 19% of 20 year olds and 29% of 80 year olds.
- Despite the name, it is usually not a fresh injury. Fissures tend to develop slowly as discs age, and a new bout of back pain rarely shows up as a new change on a scan.
- A fissure can sometimes be a source of back pain, and a disc with a fissure can go on to bulge or herniate and press on a nerve. Your specialist will match the scan to your symptoms, not treat the scan.
- Treatment follows NICE advice for low back pain: information, staying active and exercise. NICE does not recommend spinal injections or disc replacement for low back pain, and fusion is considered only in rare circumstances and/or as part of a research study. Some symptoms need urgent or emergency help.

Go to A&E or call 999 straight away if you have back pain together with:

- Pain, tingling, weakness or numbness in both legs.
- Loss of feeling around your genitals or your bottom (anus).
- Changes in your bladder or bowels, such as difficulty peeing, or peeing or pooing yourself.
- Changes in how your penis or vagina feels during sex, not being able to get or keep an erection, or not being able to orgasm.
- Chest pain.
- Pain that started after a serious accident, such as a car accident.

Several of these can be signs of cauda equina syndrome, which needs treatment in hospital as soon as possible. Do not drive yourself to A&E: ask someone to drive you, or call 999 for an ambulance. Ask for an urgent GP appointment or contact NHS 111 if you have back pain and feel hot, cold, shivery or generally unwell, or if the pain is severe, starts suddenly or is getting worse quickly.

Not sure how urgent it is? Call NHS 111. More warning signs: spinemathema.com/warning-signs

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General information only, not personal medical advice.

If you are worried about your symptoms, contact your GP, NHS 111, or in an emergency call 999.

Written by Mr Ahmed-Ramadan Sadek, Neurosurgeon.



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