

Options for Spine Treatments

Benefits and Risks of Back Surgery

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The spinal column is very complex in structure and function. Experts in the field of medicine agree that spine surgery represents one of the most complicated surgical procedures. It is certainly more complex than common joint surgical procedures. When spine surgery goes well, the outcome is often good. When spine surgery does not go well, the patient may experience persistent symptoms, and/or new signs and symptoms. Surgical complications can be both devastating and disabling.

When signs and symptoms persist and/or progress after back surgery this is referred to as a failed back syndrome (FBS). It is truly not a syndrome but a set of circumstances, which leads to persistent or progressive complaints. Because the spine is so extremely complex, the precise cause of the post surgical failure cannot always be determined. It is usually a result of many contributing factors. Spine surgery can potentially compromise small blood vessels and normal pain sensitive tissues. FBS typically presents a challenge to all specialists. The presentation can sometimes be so challenging that many specialists refuse to see or follow-up with an individual who has failed back presentation. Subsequently, these patients end up seeing numerous physicians leading to additional frustration and cost.

Many patients who suffer with failed back syndrome rely on heavy doses of narcotics in order to manage or control their pain. The side effects from chronic use of these medications may complicate the condition or create new symptoms unrelated to the original diagnosis. Most individuals who suffer from failed back syndrome are unable to return to work for prolonged periods of time and suffer from bouts of depression as well as relational stress. The presentation typically puts a great stress on their family relationships.

When back surgery goes well, it can transform a person's life. It may allow them to return to work, enjoy recreational pursuits and improve social and family interaction. Reduction of nerve compromise can lead to improved sleep habits and return to function. The reduction of chronic back and/or extremity pain can lead to a positive change in personality and coping skills.

Some of the Risks of the Surgery:

When done on the right patient at the right time, the outcome of back surgery can be good. For some patients who experience progressive muscle weakness or disturbances of bowel and bladder function, surgical decompression becomes an absolute necessity to prevent permanent paralysis and impairment. The number of individuals requiring emergency spine surgery makes up a relatively small percentage of the total number of back surgeries performed each year. The dangers and potential side effects of back surgery are considerable. As with any surgery, there are potential complications associated with anesthesia. Many spine specialists try to avoid performing back surgery in individuals over 70 years of age due to the increased risk associated with age-related cardiovascular decline.

Variable Important for Good Surgical Outcome

- Accurate diagnosis.
- Patient's overall physical condition and health.
- Experience of the surgeon performing the procedure.
- The severity of the problem.
- Choice of the surgical method.

The more experienced the spine surgeon is, the more likely the outcome will be favorable. Greater experience may lead to a better outcome. The surgeon's experience becomes critical when dealing with complications if they should arise during or after the procedure.

Some surgical procedures are extremely straightforward such as operating on a herniated disc at one level that is compressing on the spinal cord or nerve root. Other conditions are less straightforward or more complicated due to multilevel involvement or multiple factors occurring at one level of the spine. In these situations, the level of the surgeon's experience becomes more important.

Exposure to Excessive Surgeries:

Surgeons are trained to perform surgery. Some surgeons are subsequently quick to recommend surgery. Numerous studies have demonstrated that more than 80-percent of individuals with herniated disc will respond favorably without surgery. Some outcome studies have demonstrated that individuals who receive surgery for a herniated disc are no better off 5-10 years later than those who were treated non-surgically. The more experienced the spine surgeon is the pickier he will be choosing which patients actually need surgery. They have learned through experience.

Some unnecessary back surgeries are performed because the patient believes that it will provide them with the best and quickest cure. The uninformed patient may demand a "quick fix" and not listen to therapeutic alternatives. They may pressure the spine specialist to proceed with surgery. There is a reduced likelihood of having unnecessary or excessive surgeries in a multidisciplinary spine center.

A spine surgeon may choose to perform a re-operation in an attempt to correct a failed back syndrome. Unnecessary second and third surgeries can lead to additional complications associated with even greater pain and limited physical capacity. Current research reveals that repeat back surgery rarely produces improvement and many patients continue to undergo additional back surgeries. It is always important for the patient to remember that their surgeon may not have personal experience with the broad spectrum of conservative and non-surgical treatments options that are available. He or she may subsequently have a bias towards surgical correction or care. It is important for the patient to also ask their surgeon how many times they have performed the surgical procedure they are recommending. They should ask how many times a year they perform the procedure. Practice helps the surgeon perfect the procedure and thus improve therapeutic outcome.