

Understanding Back Pain

Age and Back Pain

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Back pain occurs in the young and old alike. The cause of pain in young adults (under 60 years of age) is most likely to be the result of a muscle strain or spinal joint inflammation (facet joint). The presence of spondylolisthesis (slippage of a vertebrae) may contribute to pain through stretching of pain sensitive supporting elements of the spine including the intervertebral disc. Younger adults are more likely to acquire an acute disc herniation than older adults. This is because the intervertebral disc become more dehydrated, thinner and stiffer as they age.

In older adults (over 60 years old) the source of back or leg pain is more likely to be the result of spinal joint (facet) pain or pain secondary to osteoarthritic changes in the spine. When these changes result in narrowing of spinal openings it is referred to as spinal stenosis. Older adults are also more likely to have a primary or secondary spinal tumor than younger adults. Degenerative disc disease and the subsequent loss of disc height leads to narrowing of the openings along each side of the spine (neuroforamen) where the spinal nerves exit. Older adults are more likely to develop spinal nerve compression or inflammation secondary to the development of bone spurs.