

The Low-Down on Back Pain

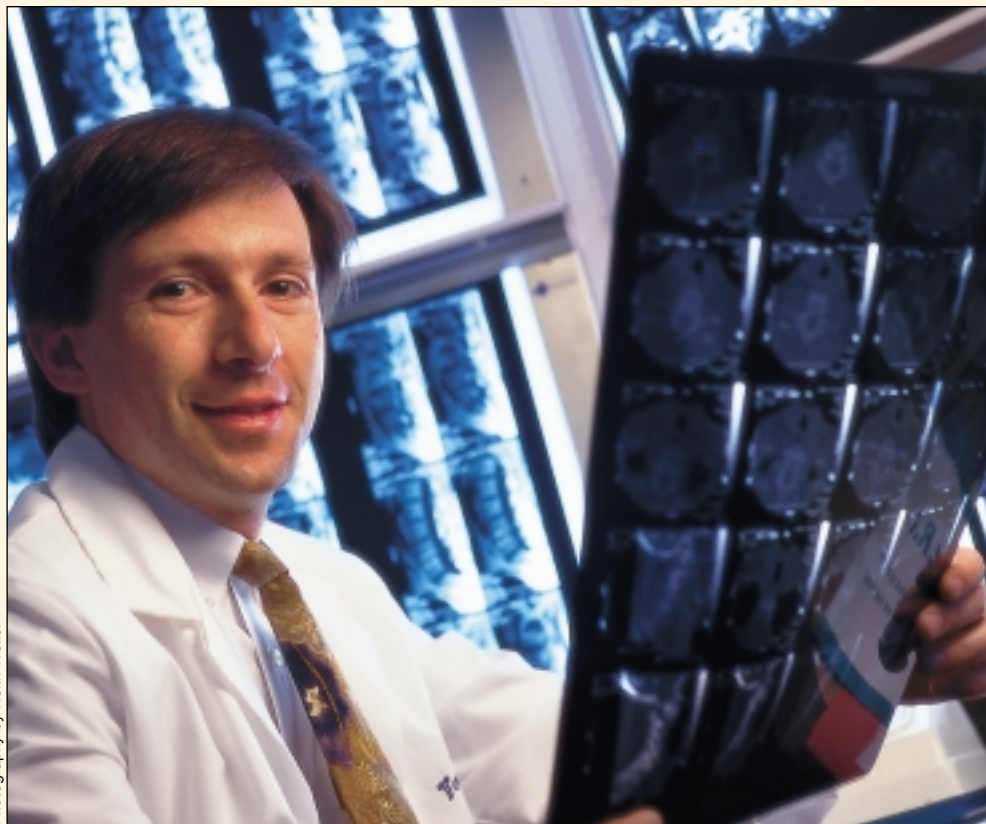
Even the slightest accidents can be mysteriously brutal on the spine. In the worst cases, they cause terrible, fiery pains that radiate from the lower back, all the way down the legs. But sometimes, leg and low back pains appear spontaneously—following no specific injury—frustrating patients and baffling their physicians.

Doctors have long known that such leg pain is caused by irritation of the nerves exiting the spinal canal and vertebrae. But all too often, warns Ira D. Fisch, M.D., treatment leaps right to surgery. Back surgery can be traumatic, even risking further damage of the spine.

Years of experience have led Dr. Fisch, a spine surgeon at Bethesda-Chevy Chase Orthopaedic Associates, to begin treatment using more conservative, less-invasive approaches that are easier on the patient and as likely to bring relief. In addition to his orthopedic residency, he trained at SpineCare and St. Mary's/Stanford Spine Center, two nationally renowned centers for spinal research and treatment. At that time, Dr. Fisch developed a philosophy that still guides his practice: "My goal is to extend conservative treatment as long as possible before resorting to surgery."

Nearly 80 percent of herniated discs (the most common cause of leg pain in people younger than 65) can be treated without an operation. Clinical analysis has shown that many patients' pain can be eliminated when physical therapy fosters a "neutral spine," alleviating stress on injured or herniated areas. "It's important," he explains, "to see each patient as a whole, understanding body mechanics as well as pain."

These days, many patients' therapy can begin with an anti-inflammatory such as Vioxx, a powerful new medication without the side effects of its predecessors. In addition, notes Dr. Fisch, significant relief of pain can be accomplished through the technique known as advanced spinal injection therapy. Under x-ray guidance, Dr. Fisch delivers pain-relieving medication to a selected nerve. He began to use this technique in 1992, a bold move that helped bring the then-unfamiliar procedure to the Washington, D.C. area. Since then he has performed over 3,000 spinal injections. Most importantly, he points out, "this approach has helped countless people avoid surgery."



Photography by Keith Weiler

Dr. Ira D. Fisch reviews a patient's x-rays.

However, when surgery is needed, Dr. Fisch employs the latest methods, including microtechniques that make operations safer and recovery as short as possible. For those suffering a disc herniation or "slipped disc," Dr. Fisch uses magnification tools to approach the disc. This allows him to make an incision approximately an inch long, thereby decreasing trauma to the patient. Frequently, patients can go home the same day and return to work within a week.

When the culprits are two adjacent vertebrae chafing one another, surgery that unites the rubbing bones—spinal fusion—can do wonders. One of the most innovative advances to this operation, the transabdominal approach to fusion surgery, is in fact a procedure that Dr. Fisch has been performing for the last eight years. Through a small anterior incision, Dr. Fisch slides muscle and abdominal tissue to the side and places a stabilization cage between the rubbing vertebrae. Prior to doing this procedure, Dr. Fisch performs the diagnostic procedure known as a discogram. Few doctors in the Washington D.C. area

have been trained to perform this test that reliably pinpoints the problem by probing the disc with a needle.

Discograms, Dr. Fisch adds, can offer even more specific information about the source of the pain than MRIs can. "The discogram helps with surgical decision-making. Plus, I do the test myself, so I'm the one interpreting the results. I have exactly the information I need when I begin the operation," he explains.

But even with all these high-tech procedures at his fingertips, Dr. Fisch is adamant when he states, "I never even consider surgery unless pain hasn't resolved through other means. The idea is to cause as little stress as possible getting people back to their lives."

If you would like to learn more, or need a physician referral, please call (301) 530-1010. ■



Bethesda-Chevy Chase Orthopaedic Associates
Dr. Ira D. Fisch,
Dr. J. Patrick Caulfield,
Dr. Edward J. Bieber,
Dr. Hereward S. Cattell and
Dr. Kurt C. Schluntz
10215 Fernwood Rd., #506
Bethesda, MD 20817
(301) 530-1010