



The pros and cons of back surgery

Planning back surgery starts with understanding your goals. Talk with your spine surgeon about what your idea of success looks like and describe your ideal post-surgery outcome. Make sure your spine surgeon understands your expectations for recovery and beyond.

Your spine surgeon will be able to give you a realistic idea of how likely surgery will help you reach your recovery goals. "We are advocates for our patients," says Dr. Greg Poulter, OrthoIndy spine surgeon. "Recommendations are based on our research, training and experience, and we take the time to explain what you can expect."

Only a qualified orthopedic doctor can correctly evaluate your spinal problem and design an effective course of treatment.

In most cases, back surgery goals include reducing pain, increasing mobility and improving the overall quality of life.

Pain relief begins with non-surgical treatment

Non-operative spine physicians, also called physiatrists, differ from surgeons because they do not perform surgery. Non-operative spine physicians use medication management, physical therapy and preventive maintenance to treat back injuries. Patients are thoroughly evaluated and undergo a physical examination, answer questions about their past medical history and possibly get advanced medical imaging, such as an MRI or X-ray.

At the start of the treatment process, your non-operative physicians will help you get a better understanding of what is causing your pain and what can be done. If these treatments are not successful and you need back surgery, non-operative spine physicians are quick to act. They work in the same clinic as the spine surgeons, and it's not uncommon for them to walk down the hall and knock on the doors of their colleagues to discuss possible next steps.

Signs that it's time to consider back surgery

You don't need to live with chronic back pain. If you are suffering from any of these symptoms, it is time to speak to a back doctor:

- Muscle weakness
- Tingling and numbness in your arms and/or legs
- Bladder and/or bowel incontinence
- Trouble walking and/or using your hands
- Bone spurs on your spine
- A herniated disk that isn't getting better
- Broken vertebrae
- Stenosis

Having these symptoms doesn't mean you'll need back surgery. It simply means that your back pain is affecting your quality of life, and you should speak to a spine physician.



What are the benefits of back surgery?

Generally, surgeons recommend surgery only when other more conservative medical treatments have not been successful. If you been following your pain treatment plan closely and are still debilitated by back pain, then back surgery might be right for you. In addition to providing pain relief, surgery might allow you to:

- Work more safely and be more productive
- Get more replenishing sleep
- Take less pain medication
- Feel good enough to work on improving your physical fitness
- Move with greater ease

Something as serious as back pain can make each day difficult. After your recovery from back surgery, you'll be amazed at how much the ever-present pain had been limiting your life.

“ Elective surgery is your choice, but some problems only get better with back surgery. ”

When is it time to consider back surgery?

Unless it is an emergency, back surgery is considered only when non-operative treatments have not resulted in significant or lasting improvements. In these cases, you can review your case with a spine surgeon to see whether you are a candidate to undergo surgery to try to accomplish your goals. Deciding on back surgery generally comes down to weighing the risks of undergoing the surgery with the expected benefits. Your surgeon will work with you to make sure you make an informed and educated decision.

There are many things to consider when deciding on back surgery or not, including:

- Your pain level
- How long you've been in pain
- How much your pain is disabling you
- Which noninvasive treatments you've tried already

“If we can look a patient in the eye and say that this surgery is the only way to lead a pain-free life, then that is the conversation we want to have,” shared Dr. Poulter. “We want to replace fear and lack of understanding with a clear communication about treatment goals and a plan for getting better.”

Elective surgery is your choice, but some problems only get better with back surgery. There are a variety of back surgery types and your spine physician will tell you the best option based on your specific issues and post-surgery goals, including:

Spinal fusion: During a spinal fusion procedure, your spine surgeon permanently connects two or more bones in your spine. This surgery relieves pain by adding stability to a spinal fracture. It is occasionally used to eliminate painful motion between vertebrae that can result from a degenerated or injured disc.

Artificial disc: Your spine surgeon inserts artificial discs between two vertebrae in this type of procedure. It is a treatment alternative to spinal fusion surgery required because of a degenerated or injured disc.

Discectomy: In this surgery, your spine surgeon removes the herniated portion of a disc to relieve irritation and inflammation of a nerve.

Laminectomy: Your spine surgeon removes the bone overlying the spinal canal. This enlarges the spinal canal and relieves nerve pressure caused by spinal stenosis.



Schedule your first back surgery consultation

Should I be nervous? It's a common question spine physicians hear when discussing back surgery with patients suffering from unrelenting back pain. "If you're not a little nervous, I would be worried," says Dr. O'Neill, OrthoIndy spine surgeon. "It is a surgery after all. Though it can be scary, it helps to learn more about the surgery. We always make sure to address all of our patient's concerns."

In most cases, there is no need to rush into back surgery. There is a good chance your back will heal itself with a proper non-surgical plan that includes physical therapy. If you are a good candidate for back surgery, your nonsurgical spine physician will discuss it with you and set up a consultation with a spine surgeon.

"During the first consultation we verify the diagnosis and explain the procedure," explains Dr. O'Neill. "We take the time to walk the patient through the entire operation. We try to meet and talk with everyone that is going to be involved, even the caregiver to make sure everyone is on the same page. Several people have to say yes before a complicated surgery moves forward."

WHAT TO EXPECT THE DAY OF YOUR SURGERY

Arrive two hours before your scheduled appointment. Remember, your surgery time is an approximation and there are a lot of things that will happen before you even enter the operating room.

You'll meet with your anesthesiologist one-hour prior to the surgery to discuss medications and get your catheter. Once you've been wheeled into the operating room, your anesthesiologist will put you under general anesthesia. It is typically 60 minutes from the time you enter the operating room until your spine surgeon makes the first incision.

After the procedure is finished, it takes 60 minutes to wake you up and take you to the recovery room. Your loved ones will be notified when your surgery is over.

“ Talking to a surgeon doesn't mean you are agreeing to surgery. Make an appointment and see if there is a right course of action for you. ”

Risks and potential complications

As serious as back surgery is, most people who undergo the procedure experience no complications. Modern techniques and technological advances have improved the safety of back surgery. Your spine surgeon will identify specific potential problems based on your current physical condition and work with you to avoid any complications that could arise. Often you will undergo a medical evaluation to minimize risks before undergoing surgery. However, despite all efforts to eliminate complications, there are still risks to keep in mind, including:

- Reaction to anesthesia (or any drugs after surgery)
- Pain
- Bleeding
- Infection
- Nerve or spinal cord damage
- Trouble with any implants
- Lack of bone healing
- Spinal fluid leak
- Medical complications, such as heart attack, blood clots, stroke or respiratory failure

Your spine surgeon will work with you to help you make an informed decision. Spine surgery generally involves treating one or more of the following:

Nerve or spinal cord compression: When your spinal cord or nerves are compressed, it can cause pain, numbness, tingling, weakness, loss of coordination or balance, and even trouble with bowel and/or bladder function.

Instability: Lower back instability often results from fractures or the degeneration or aging of your spine. Your surgeon may have to make your spine unstable in order to relieve pressure on the nerves.

Spine deformities: When your spine loses its normal shape, the result may be scoliosis or kyphosis. Surgery is sometimes used to restore the alignment of the spine.

SURGICAL EMERGENCIES

Surgical emergencies for back pain are extremely rare, but they can occur. If you experience a medical emergency such as loss of bowel and/or bladder control or if you develop progressive weakness in your legs, please make an appointment to see a spine specialist right away.

RECOVERY

You may have body swelling, but it should subside in one to two days. Your spine doctor will have you use an intermittent pneumatic compression device or have you wear compression leggings, called TED hose. Both of these help prevent blood clots while you are immobile. You will have a catheter inserted to drain urine. Your nurses will remove it when you are able to get out of bed and use the restroom. You'll have one or more drains near your incision to help the orthopedic doctors estimate your blood loss.

PHYSICAL THERAPY

You will be asked to sit up and get out of bed on the first day after the operation. It is important to the recovery process to start walking as soon as possible. You should make every effort to do as the physical therapist asks. You'll be seen by a therapist every day while in the hospital. They help determine when you can go home.

They also teach you on basic mobility instructions for sitting, standing, rolling over in bed and how to use the walker with strong posture.

If you are a candidate for back surgery, the benefits of having the procedure outweigh the potential complications. OrthoIndy surgeons will not recommend surgery unless the expected benefits outweigh the risks.

With years of experience and the most cutting-edge tools available, OrthoIndy spine surgeons will give you the best chance possible to achieve your recovery goals. Make an appointment and let OrthoIndy's team of experts help you find a solution that will work best for you.

