

Questions for Your Spine Surgeon

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PURPOSE

In the current medical climate, major surgical decisions are often made quickly without the surgeon being aware of important factors that affect the perception of pain. A surgeon generally assumes every possible treatment has already been tried and surgery is perceived as the last resort. It is your responsibility to gather, understand and present the data to make the best choice about undergoing spine surgery.

BASIC BACKGROUND CONCEPTS

There are two areas to be addressed to make an accurate surgical decision: 1) The source of the pain and 2) The state of your nervous system.

- Spine surgery is only helpful if there is a distinctly identifiable problem on an imaging study and the symptoms match the expected pattern of pain. Just because you are having pain, doesn't mean there is always a structural lesion causing it. If a surgeon can't see it, they can't fix it.
- If pain in ANY part of your body is present for more than six months, your nervous system has memorized it and it doesn't matter what procedures are performed. The chances of success are markedly reduced.
- If your nervous system is on sustained "high-alert" for ANY reason, surgical outcomes are consistently poor.

PRINCIPLES BEHIND THE SOLUTION

Know your surgeon and make sure he or she knows you.

- Be honest with yourself and your surgeon about your life stresses and mood. You have to calm down your nervous before proceeding with elective surgery.
- Make sure your surgeon clearly explains the anatomy, what pain it would be expected to solve, and what are the chances of success.

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR SURGEON

Know your surgeon and make sure he or she knows you.

- What do you know about my current life circumstances? Are we going to discuss any current symptoms I have of anxiety, anger and/or depression? (These are all known to have an adverse effect on surgical outcomes.) What resources would you recommend to support me and improve my chances of a successful surgical outcome?

- How long do you think I should be getting a restful night's sleep before deciding on surgery?
- Will surgery solve my neck, back, or thoracic pain? What exact pain do you expect the operation to solve? What symptoms will stay the same?
- Ask, "What's the urgency?" if you feel like your surgeon is pushing you to quickly schedule an elective surgery.

There are many additional (and appropriate) questions that can be asked. However, these questions will give you a feel for the overall approach of your surgeon. The answers will let you know if your surgeon is interested in treating you as a whole person or if they view their role as only performing an operation.

FIND ANOTHER SURGEON IF ...

- Their office requires spinal imaging such as x-rays, CT scans, or MRIs before they will schedule an evaluation with you.
- Surgical recommendations are made on the initial visit.
- If your surgeon doesn't insist on maximizing all aspects of your rehab for at least 12 weeks prior to making a decision, whether it is a large or small procedure.
- You don't feel you are being heard, acknowledged, or getting clear explanations. This is especially true if you feel your surgeon is impatient with you.
- Your surgeon has little interest in your life circumstances, including new stressful events within the prior 12 months.
- Someone on the team doesn't assess your levels of anxiety, frustration, and depression.
- Your surgeon becomes defensive when questioned, or is unhappy with you seeking other opinions. It is an even larger red flag if he or she begins to talk negatively about another colleague.

You should feel comfortable with your surgeon, have a good working relationship, and jointly develop a plan to address all aspects of your pain.