

Orthopaedic Connection

Leg Pain Coming From The Back: Conclusion

By Thomas J. Haverbush, M.D.
Orthopaedic Surgeon

Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

I should point out that there are many conditions which can cause pain in one leg. Sciatica and ruptured disc are one of the important causes, but there are others. I will lose you if I start going into a lot of other causes. So I will concentrate on a ruptured disc as the cause of leg pain.

Conservative Treatment

I pointed out last time that up to 80% of patients with ruptured discs will improve with time and non operative treatment. Surgery is never the first thing I think of in treating sciatica. There is a whole menu which I mentioned last week. So there is hope short of surgery. My patients appreciate the fact that I try very hard to make them better without resorting to surgery as the only solution. If you don't improve however, I won't tell you that you have to learn to live with it! If it is severe, no one could live with sciatica.

Enter Laminectomy

If a ruptured disc has been specifically identified as the cause of the leg pain and it hasn't decreased markedly with conservative treatment, you are probably headed for back surgery.

Now there are a large number of back surgeries that are being done currently. In the case of a ruptured disc there is only one procedure we need to consider.

Laminectomy is one of, if not the oldest types of back surgery. It was described originally by an Orthopaedic Surgeon and a Neurosurgeon in Boston in the 1930's. At first it was thought that the bulging disc was a tumor! That of course was disproved, because the bulging disc is simply material from inside the core of the disc that has pushed outward and is pressing against one of the spinal nerve roots that form the sciatic nerve.

What Is Laminectomy?

The lamina is a portion of one of the vertebrae (back bones). It is a kind of roof that covers the nerve root and the bulging disc beneath the root.

I have to remove part of the lamina in performing the surgery so it is termed "laminectomy".

When a portion of the "roof" is removed and I can see the nerve root. I retract the nerve root so I can take out the offending piece of disc beneath. That's it in a nutshell. No fusion of bones together, no metal screws, plates, rods etc.

It is beautiful in its simplicity.

Getting Better

The nerve root that has pressure (pinching) removed can take a variable amount of time to recover. Nerves don't like being pinched. They are swollen and bruised and don't feel good. The body and nature make the nerve better in their own way. I just take the pressure away by removing the bulging disc. I always hope for the patient that in the first day or two the leg pain will leave. It does sometimes, but in other patients it can take days or longer. Everybody's different.

Most patients are able to be up walking the night of surgery. Many go home the next day. A few may stay a second day.

Results

Laminectomy surgery is 90% plus successful in easing leg pain that has a spinal origin. It is less reliable in relieving back pain. The reason being the back usually has some wear and tear problems or the disc wouldn't have bulged out in the first place. You don't make a new back by doing a laminectomy. Therefore, the leg pain leaves and the "back trouble" can be managed by proper body mechanics and a preventive maintenance back exercise program.

I hope this has been helpful in understanding sciatica and lumbar disc protrusion.

Gratiot County Herald Archive and Office Website

I sincerely hope all of our loyal readers will take advantage of an endless amount of musculoskeletal information. It is easy! Log onto www.orthopodsurgeon.com.

It gives access to all Website articles, Your Orthopaedic Connection and every GCH article from most recent to the first. Full text! It covers everything I do in the office and hospital.

Good Health. Good life. All the best to you.

Dr. Haverbush