

Pain From Degenerative Disc. Maybe Not.....

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

Degenerative Disc Disease

Doctors use this term a lot talking to patients. They write it on a requisition for an x-ray study perhaps that the patient reads.

It sounds ominous, gloomy and scary. "I'm falling apart" is the usual patient thought.

This is especially true if the person is having a lot of pain in the neck or lower back.

Well, it's no more a disease than gray hair.

Did you know that 90% of people over sixty show some evidence of what I call "wear and tear changes" in their disc?

Yes, it's true. MRI scans of the neck and/or back in people over sixty show degenerative change (wear and tear) 90% of the time even though the patient may have no symptoms.

The change process is almost universal in people over sixty. It is a natural process (like gray hair or eyesight changes).

The Disc

A disc (some spell it disk; same thing) can be thought of as a little shock absorber or water balloon between the vertebrae (back bones). A disc is 70% water surrounded by a little tissue.

Over a period of time the disc loses some of its water.

Why does that happen?

- Aging
- Occupation
- Genetic inheritance
- Smoking (nicotine causes constriction of tiny blood vessels cutting off circulation)
- Mysterious other factors not clear yet

MRI shows a healthy disc as bright, white and shiny. It turns black appearing in older patients.

Disease implies illness. It is not. It is a natural process.

Origin of Pain

There is debate whether these changes especially in only one disc are the origin of the pain. They could be, but they don't have to be.

Ligaments and muscles are also affected by time and wear and tear changes. Also affected are the little facet joints located in the neck and spine behind the disc.

In reality, the back is an impossibly complicated structure that has baffled physicians since the earliest days of medicine. Lots of doctors won't see patients with neck and back pain because the problems are so hard to diagnose and difficult to treat effectively.

If you think because of all the back surgery being done now, we have the answer, think again. I do back surgery if I feel it is needed.

I see numerous patients who have had three or four (or more) back operations and they are not sure they are much better. What does this tell you?

I can see this has to be a two part series so try real hard to come back next week to hopefully learn more.

All Orthopaedic Surgery problems can be evaluated by Dr. Haverbush at the Lakeview Community Wellness Center in Lakeview or at the office in Alma at 315 Warwick Dr., Alma, Michigan.

Please call 989-463-6092 for information or to schedule an appointment.

Future Lakeview Community Wellness Center Clinic dates are October 2, October 16 and October 30, 2009.

Please don't forget there is a wealth of accurate information about all the Orthopaedic conditions I treat on the office teaching website www.orthopodsurgeon.com. Please log on and check it out.

We are happy to answer questions from readers. You can e-mail me at orthopodsurgeon@hotmail.com or write to me at 315 Warwick Dr., Alma, Michigan 48801.

Our goal is simple - To help people return to more pain free functional lives.

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

Be well.

Dr. Haverbush