



**SOUTHEASTERN SPINE INSTITUTE**

presents

*Popular Subjects  
and FAQs*

**An eBook for Patients**

# *Popular Subjects and FAQs*

Presented by the SOUTHEASTERN SPINE INSTITUTE

Chapter 1:	Get to Know Your Spine .....	1
Chapter 2:	The Neck Bone’s Attached to the Back Bone .....	5
Chapter 3:	Belly Fat and Back Pain.....	9
Chapter 4:	Bone Density: Just a Woman’s Issue? .....	12
Chapter 5:	Why Ask for a Referral to SSI? .....	16
Chapter 6:	The SSI Advantage of “Everything Under One Roof” .....	19
Chapter 7:	Board Certification: What It Means.....	22
Chapter 8:	Conservative Back Care Makes Sense.....	25
Chapter 9:	The Difference Between X-Ray, Fluoroscopy, MRI and Ultrasound.....	29
Chapter 10:	Healing As You Age .....	33
Chapter 11:	Managing Your Medications.....	37
Chapter 12:	When Are Orthopedic Shoes Necessary? .....	40
Chapter 13:	When Should Children See a Back Specialist?.....	43

## Chapter 1

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### *Get to Know Your Spine*

If you've never had back pain, then you may not even give your spine much of a second thought. It's there holding you erect and is attached to other parts of your body. If, on the other hand, you suffer with back pain, you most likely want to get intimate with the details of your spine, what affects its health and how you can take better care of it.



Either way, a little knowledge can go a long way in protecting your spine health. SC spinal physicians want you to protect your back for the rest of your life. Whether you suffer from back pain or not, get to know the vital structure that extends from the top of your neck to the bottom of your tailbone. To know it is to love it.

## *Vertebrae*

The vertebrae are the 24 bones that make up your spine. The bones in the vertebrae are divided into five categories:

- The top seven bones are part of the cervical spine. They control the flexibility in your neck and support your head movements. Cervical vertebrae are slightly smaller than the rest of the bones in your spine.
- The next 12 vertebrae are part of the thoracic spine and are connected to your ribs, which extend just past your shoulder blades and protect your vital organs. You get your stability from the thoracic vertebrae as well as the support to lift heavy objects.
- Many people are familiar with the next five vertebrae of the lumbar spinal region. These are the biggest and heaviest vertebrae and support the total weight of your whole spine. Most reported lower back pain occurs in the hard-working lumbar spine.
- The sacrum is a bone that's shaped like a triangle and connects your spine to your hips. This vertebrae controls signals to your genitalia, your upper legs and thighs. It's very tough and rarely damaged except in traumatic accidents.
- The coccyx is the last vertebra, also called the tailbone. It's made up of four bones fused together to support you while

sitting. The tailbone on a woman is slightly rotated to accommodate childbirth, leaving it more exposed to injury.

### *Spinal Cord*

The vertebrae column is a long, flexible rod that covers your spinal cord, which includes the nerves that connect to your brain and signal all other activity in your body. The column also attaches to your ribs and supports your head.

The network of nerves that makes up the spinal cord weaves in and out of the tube, connecting to your arms and legs. Signals from your brain pass along the spinal cord to control sensation and movement.

### *Discs, Muscles and Ligaments*

Discs are the spongy shock absorbers in your spine that take all the pressure off the vertebrae so they don't crack every time you move. Discs are designed like jelly donuts, softer in the middle, filled with a liquid substance. When injured, some of that substance leaks out and causes the vertebrae to rub together. For optimal spine health, doctors recommend that you maintain a healthy weight to keep discs intact; those extra pounds put too much pressure on the soft centers of the discs.

Your spine also includes more than 120 ligaments and muscles entwined throughout your spine and spinal column. The muscles give your back its flexibility as you bend and twist. Ligaments stabilize your abdomen, back and sides.

### *Get and Maintain Spine Health*

The spine physicians at the Southeastern Spine Institute want you to take care of the precious parts of your back. When you do have back pain, the source of the problem is not always easily apparent

because there are so many moving parts in your spine. Always seek guidance from one or more of the experienced back physicians at SSI before trying any home remedies.

Get to know your spine better to treat it better. Understand how your body works together for your overall well-being. Develop walking, sitting and standing techniques that lead to a healthy back. Spine health means you and your back on very familiar and friendly terms.

## Chapter 2

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# *The Neck Bone's Attached to the Backbone*

**B**ack pain affects most people at some point in their lives, with lower back pain the most common. Fortunately, most back pain doesn't require spinal surgery. While surgery may be the treatment of last resort, most often, back pain responds to more conservative methods such as exercise, diet, rest, manipulation and pain relievers.

One of the most difficult aspects of treating your back is finding the source of your pain. Because your spine is attached to every other part of your body, an injury in one place may result in pain arising in a completely different place.

### *A Pain in the Neck*

Take care of your neck to avoid back pain or even spinal surgery. Injuries that can create pain and lead to the potential need for spinal surgery can include:

- Strain due to repetitive motion at work or while participating in sports
- Poor posture

- Improper lifting techniques
- Sudden ligament pull when moving awkwardly
- Over-stretching



Neck pain can come on suddenly or develop slowly over time. And while it may manifest in your lower back, the pain actually may originate in your neck. If you consider the work your neck performs every day — holding up your head, twisting and turning — it's no wonder it's a common source of back pain. If you...

- Sleep wrong
- Look at a computer screen too long
- Get stressed out

...you could develop serious neck pain. Neck pain often dissipates within a couple days, but if you continue the harmful practices or unhealthy lifestyles that led to the pain, there could be spinal surgery in your future.



## *Use Your Head*

Take these common-sense steps to prevent neck pain and spinal surgery:

- Look up from the computer every 15 minutes or so.
- Practice proper posture when sitting, standing and driving.
- Get a new pillow if you awaken with neck pain every morning.
- Meditate or do yoga if you get easily stressed out.
- Treat minor aches with anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen.

Certain exercises, like the chin tuck and the back burn, help strengthen the ligaments and muscles that support your neck and shoulders. Performed regularly, they'll help you withstand the rigors placed on your neck each and every day.

## *Chin Tuck*

You can perform this effective exercise throughout the day to combat neck pain.

1. Stand with your back against a wall with your feet about three inches out.
2. Keep your arms straight down at your sides.
3. Pull your chin in and push against the wall so that your upper back is pressed flat against the wall.
4. Hold for five seconds and release.
5. Repeat 10 times.

Once you get the hang of the chin tuck, do it while sitting or standing anywhere — even without the wall.

## *Back Burn*

In addition to strengthening your neck, the back burn works to bolster your shoulder muscles, which play a big role in preventing neck pain that can lead to spinal surgery.

1. Stand with your back against a wall with your feet about four inches out.
2. Stretch your arms straight out in front of you, with your palms out and your fingers splayed.
3. Press your head against the wall and slowly raise your arms above your head.
4. Just as slowly, lower your arms so they are resting at your sides.
5. Repeat 10 times.

## Chapter 3

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### *Belly Fat and Back Pain*

If you're overweight, you're in the majority in America. According to the National Institutes of Health, two-thirds of Americans are overweight or obese. Black, white, young, old, even rich and poor — the numbers may change slightly, but you'll find a large overweight percentage in every group. It's considered an epidemic in some circles, and excess fat around your midsection is the most dangerous to your health.

But for the spinal doctors at the Southeastern Spine Institute, weight gain means one thing: back pain. Added weight can and does cause back pain in patients. The excess weight — especially in your belly — strains your back muscles and ligaments, causing back pain. One of the first solutions to back pain that doctors advise is to lose weight.

#### *Spine Problems from Weight Gain*

With proper posture, you stand upright with your chest out and your chin up. Your stomach is tucked in and the slight curve of your lower back keeps your hips straight. If you're carrying extra weight, however, every part of your body gets heavier. And your spine bears the burden of that weight, literally.



When you've experienced weight gain, your upper spine can't straighten out properly. Over time, you may develop an unnatural curvature, so that your neck is always bent forward and your head leans over your chest instead of upright between your shoulders. Because it happens incrementally, you may not even notice until your spinal doctor shows you your X-rays.

Another problem that can lead to back pain occurs in your lower back. Weight gain in your abdomen forces your pelvis to slant forward. It's under a tremendous strain, trying to carry your weight. Because your pelvis is pulled to the front, your lower back curves forward too. The graceful arch in a normal lower back becomes more rounded, which puts more pressure on the nerves, leading to back pain.

## *Back Pain Results*

A normal back arches up from your pelvis and back, surrounding your vital organs, before curving inward again to your neck and extending up to your head, right between your shoulders. It's balanced and structured to provide many years of pain-free support.

Once your back is pulled out of normal alignment because of weight gain, your muscles, ligaments and bones have to work even harder to carry the weight. They aren't in the position they were designed to be. It's like bending the fingers of a baseball glove back. You can still get your hand in the glove, and you can still catch with it, but it isn't working the way it was designed.

As a result, nerves exiting your spinal column will become constricted or a disc will bulge or herniate, and you will experience back pain. It won't happen all at once, but if you are overweight, it will happen eventually. It's just a matter of time.

## *Dealing with Weight Gain*

There are a host of health complications that result from being obese or overweight. Back pain is only one of the side effects. Diabetes is a disease that can kill you. Heart troubles — your heart has to work that much harder when there's that much more of you — is another threat to your life. Back pain is a symptom of trouble that could lead to even worse complications.

If you're overweight and now have back pain, get it checked out from spinal physicians like those at the Southeastern Spine Institute. They can show you X-rays and MRIs of your spine. They can prescribe exercise or physical therapy to help you lose weight. Think of weight gain as a health problem and take steps to beat it. Before it beats you.

## Chapter 4

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### *Bone Density: Just a Woman's Issue?*

Usually, when you hear that someone has osteoporosis or tested for low bone density, you think of grandma and her stooped shoulders. But spine physicians are now urging everyone, including older men, to get bone density tests. In fact, even children can be at risk for reduced bone density in many cases.



Both older men and women alike are at risk of developing weak, brittle bones. Nearly half the women over the age of 50 see spine doctors for low bone density issues. But the health care figures for men are equally frightening:

- As many as one-quarter of the men over 50 will suffer a broken bone due to osteoporosis.
- About 80,000 men break a hip in the U.S. every year.
- In 2015, approximately two million men in America have been diagnosed with osteoporosis.
- Another 20 million are at risk for the low bone density condition.
- Men are more at risk of dying after breaking a hip than women due to complications related to the injury.

### *A Simple Test*

Spine doctors at the Southeastern Spine Institute can give you a simple, pain-free test to determine your bone density level. You don't have to wait until you have a broken bone to find out if you're one of the many Americans who have low bone density. The results of your test can determine how much risk you pose for breaking bones in the future.

A bone density test is an X-ray procedure that takes 20 to 30 minutes. You just lie on a table and the machine passes over your body, recording the density in your body, with particular attention on your spine, neck and hips.

Spine doctors then determine your T-score from the results. The T-score is a relative number that your doctor can compare to a

healthy person of your age and sex. Here are some T-score guidelines:

- A T-score of negative 1 (-1) and above means you have healthy bones.
- A T-score between negative 1 and negative 2.5 indicates the beginning of osteoporosis, called osteopenia.
- If your T-score is lower than negative 2.5, your doctor often diagnoses osteoporosis.

### *Prevention Can Help*

While age is the primary cause of low bone density, other factors come into play as well. You can take steps to reduce some of your risk through a few lifestyle changes. Factors that play a role in bone density include:

- Family history
- Lack of exercise
- Smoking
- Excessive drinking
- Low estrogen levels
- Low testosterone levels
- Steroid medications
- Medical conditions such as:
  - Chronic kidney failure
  - Rheumatoid arthritis
  - Prostate cancer
  - Gastrointestinal disease



Osteoporosis is not inevitable. In addition to the lifestyle changes you can make to prevent the disease, there are drugs and therapies that your spine doctors can prescribe to reduce the severity. Sometimes, the drugs and therapies can even reverse the condition, if it's caught early enough. If you believe you have reason to worry, ask your spine doctor at the Southeastern Spine Institute for a bone density test.

## Chapter 5

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### *Why Ask for a Referral to SSI?*

**M**edical practices have changed dramatically in the past 50 years. If you're reading this on a computer or another electronic device, you may be too young to remember the family doctor making house calls. You probably have never seen an actual doctor offer you a cigarette or wear one of those weird mirrors on his head.

Today, many people with health insurance have a Primary Care Physician (PCP) who delivers front-line care, including general check-ups, blood tests, and most prescription medication. But if you need to find out why you have pain in your hip, you have to go to an orthopedic doctor. And if you have a urinary tract infection, you must see a urologist.

#### *A World of Specialists*

To visit any of these specialists and have your insurance companies cover the visit and any subsequent treatment, you often need a referral from your PCP. You see specialists in spinal medicine in the same manner. Your doctor agrees you need to see a specialist and recommends someone or gives you a choice of several.

It's usually up to you to make sure the specialist you choose or your PCP chooses is covered by your medical insurance. You've

heard of “in-network coverage” and “out of network charges.” This is an example of why it matters. If you choose a specialist out of your network, you may pay more, but you choose him anyway because you want the best care.

### *Southeastern Spine Institute: The Best*

When it comes to spinal medicine, the Southeastern Spine Institute is the region’s largest and most complete practice. Everything you may need, from physical therapy to surgery, is located on one campus located in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina. The doctors, surgeons and staff at the facility are committed to relieving your pain and getting you back to your normal life as quickly as possible.



You may not need surgery — in fact, fewer than 10 percent of all patients do — but the skill and experience of the medical staff and the diagnostic tools at their disposal mean that you get the best care

and the most thorough diagnosis. Spinal medicine doesn't get any more advanced than at the Southeastern Spine Institute.

### *Ask for Us by Name*

So if you ever find yourself in need of a spinal specialist. Ask your primary care physician to refer you to the Southeastern Spine Institute. Even if the practice is out of your network, you can be sure to get the best care. When you're suffering, when it's your back that's hurting, make sure you get an accurate diagnosis. Only with the correct diagnosis can you receive appropriate treatment.

And the Southeastern Spine Institute is perfectly set up to lead you and your doctor to a correct diagnosis. The facility includes:

- Digital X-rays
- MRIs
- Digital Fluoroscopy
- Ultrasound
- Nerve Conduction Studies & EMGs
- Physical Therapy

Everything your doctor needs, including access to other spinal medicine specialists, is available at the Southeastern Spine Institute. Ask for it by name.

## Chapter 6

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# *The SSI Advantage of “Everything Under One Roof”*

The Southeastern Spine Institute advertises “everything under one roof,” but what does that really mean and how does it really help you when you’re in pain? One-stop back care saves you time and money while reducing stress. Like many of the people who come to SSI, you’re there because of a problem:

- Back pain
- Leg, neck or back stiffness
- Throbbing or shooting pain
- Lack of mobility

There are so many reasons why you’re experiencing your symptoms that even the highly trained doctors at SSI have work to do to make a correct diagnosis. Your spine doctor will take a complete medical history and perhaps have you undergo a series of diagnostic tests to discover the exact cause of your pain or discomfort.

Then, your doctor has to determine the best course of action to treat your ailment. Since the SSI philosophy encourages conservative

treatment, surgery is usually the last resort. You may try pain management or physical therapy before other, more invasive treatments are considered. This course of action benefits you, since no one wants surgery if it is avoidable. But you don't want to run all over town to receive the various steps in your treatment.



### *Available Resources*

On the Southeastern Spine Institute's campus in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, you have access to every type of state-of-the-art diagnostic tool, from digital X-rays and MRIs to digital fluoroscopy and ultrasounds. Whatever your back doctor might want to test, he can have it done on the same campus.

The same is true for treatment options. If you need physical therapy, SSI has a functional, fully staffed physical therapy department. SSI can provide pain management, rehab facilities and non-surgical procedures. And of course, SSI surgeons can perform spinal surgery in their own certified ambulatory surgical center, South Carolina's only ambulatory surgical center dedicated to spine surgeries.

SSI now has 125 medical professionals practicing under one roof on SSI's campus. The nurses, surgeons, therapists, doctors, technicians, nurse practitioners and even receptionists work hard for one reason: to relieve your pain and heal you.

### *No Waiting*

Dr. Don Johnson, SSI's founder, had the vision to put everything a back care patient might need under one roof. It was no accident. When departments co-exist and work together, you ultimately benefit. Diagnoses can be made faster and care delivered quicker. You don't need to wait for a referral and a new appointment. When you come to the Southeastern Spine Institute, you can get the treatment you need, oftentimes in one visit.

No one wants to put off relief. By the time you get to SSI, you have most likely suffered enough. The advantage of "everything under one roof" becomes obvious if you can be diagnosed and treated on the same day, during the same visit.

If you've been putting off medical attention because your pain is "bearable," it's time to contact the Southeastern Spine Institute to have it addressed. It won't go away on its own, and is only likely to get worse. Come see for yourself the advantage of having everything under one roof.

## Chapter 7

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### *Board Certification: What It Means*

**H**ow can you tell if your spine specialist is the best? Anyone can call himself a doctor. You can even find Doctors of Philosophy, most likely serving you dinner at McCrady's. But when you need a specialist in spinal medicine, you want to make sure that the doctor advising you has the bona fides to back up his diploma.





Whenever you visit any kind of medical practitioner, always ask questions. It's the best way to get the answers you need to make important medical decisions. Ask:

- How long ago he got his Doctor of Medicine (MD) degree
- How long he's been practicing
- How long he's been licensed in your state
- If he specializes in any particular type of spinal medicine, like pain management or lumbar surgery
- How often he does the procedure he's recommending for you
- Is he board certified

And while you may not have the resources to check on his credentials, there is a way to determine whether your back surgeon is as good as he says he is. Because this is a common concern across the United States, you can count on a third party, an organization interested in upholding the standards of medicine.

### *Back Surgeon Certifications*

Spinal surgery, like any surgery, is complex and potentially life-threatening. You must have complete confidence in your back surgeon before you go under the knife. You must be certain that your surgeon not only has the skills to do what needs to be done, but has the experience to keep you safe and healthy. So the next time you're in a consultation, ask your doctor about his certifications.

Certifications represent the highest standards of quality. To be board certified, a back surgeon has to pass the certification requirements of the American Board of Orthopedic Surgery:

- Earning an MD from an accredited medical school

- Undergoing three-to-five years of residency training in a back surgery program
- Passing written (and sometimes oral) exams
- Keeping up-to-date in the latest advances in spinal surgery
- Maintaining national standards in ethics, safety and communication

### *Southeastern Spine Institute's Surgeons*

At the Southeastern Spine Institute, staff surgeons take your safety very seriously. All of the spine surgeons are either board certified or board eligible (meaning they are working toward their certification) in Orthopedic Surgery by the American Board of Orthopedic Surgery. Some of the senior surgeons hold additional certifications and have leadership roles in other medical societies.

It's only by being active in professional and medical organizations that the best spinal surgeons learn about the latest breakthroughs in spinal medicine and the newest proven techniques in back surgery. As a result of their involvement and leadership, the back surgeons at the Southeastern Spine Institute are among the most trusted, most experienced and most skilled — not only in Charleston or in South Carolina, but in the entire Southeast and beyond.

So if you want the best care you can get, make an appointment at the Southeastern Spine Institute, where the back surgeons are second to none.

## Chapter 8

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# *Conservative Back Care Makes Sense*

The medical doctors at the Southeastern Spine Institute (SSI) promote a conservative approach when it comes to spinal medicine. If you are in pain, SSI has a highly regarded Pain Management department to ease your symptoms. SSI's spine physicians then use state-of-the-art diagnostic tools to determine the root cause of your pain.



It's only with an accurate diagnosis that you can receive appropriate treatment. Some spine physicians may opt for exploratory surgery, but that's costly, invasive and often unnecessary. At SSI, your medical doctor will take his time with you to gather all the facts. If a CT scan or X-ray is required, SSI has the equipment within its offices. If an MRI will better illuminate the issue you're having, SSI has one of those too.

### *After the Diagnosis*

Once your Charleston spine physician has made a diagnosis of your condition, he often will order a series of procedures of gradually increasing severity. Surgery is the final step, and it's performed only when every other treatment has failed to correct your condition. Your spinal physician knows that fewer than 10 percent of back patients require surgery because so often a less invasive procedure works.

And SSI has many non-invasive procedures to call on when needed. The list of non-surgical procedures is lengthy but includes:

- Discography / IDET
- Epidural Steroid Injections
- Physical Reconditioning
- Rehabilitation Services
- Selective Nerve Root Blocks
- Trigger Point Injections

### *Conservative Spinal Medicine*

SSI's spine physicians use a conservative approach to easing any neck, back, arm and leg pain you might be experiencing. The

physical medicine and rehab care you'll receive at SSI has two goals:

1. To get you on your feet again
2. To cure your physical ailment

The first helps you return to your normal life. The second helps ensure that you don't have to return for future treatments. To get you there, the medical doctors at SSI follow a conservative treatment path. Non-surgical solutions are always tried first. Their approach to spinal medicine looks like this:

- First, stop your pain.
- Find the root cause of your pain with the latest diagnostic tools.
- Make sure you won't get worse when returning to your daily life.
- Devise a treatment plan to heal your back.
- Try non-surgical and non-pharmaceutical techniques to heal your back problem.
- Surgery, even minimally invasive surgery, is a last resort.
- Get you back to your daily life, as safely and quickly as possible.
- Rehabilitate as necessary to strengthen your back.
- Provide educational counseling so your condition doesn't return.

### *A Multidisciplinary Approach*

The Southeastern Spine Institute is a collection of physical medicine and rehab doctors and spinal surgeons under one roof. The experts in the various disciplines work together to diagnose and treat your

back problems. Together, SSI's medical doctors determine an appropriate course of treatment and rehabilitation for you, starting with the most conservative approach and moving toward more aggressive treatments. Because doctors with different specialties collaborate to heal you, you can be sure that they have left no possible treatment option unexplored.

Whether you're in Charleston or elsewhere, you owe it to yourself to check out the spinal medicine care available at SSI in Mount Pleasant, SC. SSI — where conservative equals cutting edge — keeps up with technological advancements, so they're always one step ahead.

## Chapter 9

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# *The Difference Between X-Ray, Fluoroscopy, MRI and Ultrasound*

When you come to the Southeastern Spine Institute (SSI) because you're experiencing back pain, the first step for your doctor is to make an accurate diagnosis. Only with the right diagnosis can a spine specialist prescribe the appropriate treatment. The spinal physicians at SSI have many resources available to them to help diagnose exactly what's causing your back pain, including:

- X-rays
- Fluoroscopy
- Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)
- Ultrasound

Your doctor also performs a physical exam, takes a medical history and asks you questions about your back pain. But these more definitive tests can confirm an early diagnosis or eliminate causes from consideration. The type of test your doctor orders depends on a number of factors, as each diagnostic test can show something new.

## *Digital X-Rays*

A digital X-ray takes a digital picture of your bones. While the X-ray machine uses radiation to penetrate your body, the process no longer requires film and the chemicals needed to develop it. X-rays have been in use for decades without any serious problems.

X-rays are often the first step leading to a diagnosis. They can reveal any problems with your actual vertebrae or spinal bones. They also can show any alignment or slippage of your bones. So X-rays can confirm a slipped disc or bone spur as the source of your pain.



## *Digital Fluoroscopy*

While an X-ray takes a single picture, a fluoroscope takes X-rays and sends the images to a monitor. A fluoroscope is like a continuous X-ray, providing live images to a TV screen. Your doctor can view the monitor to perform certain procedures, such as pain blocks or steroid injections.



In the strictest sense, a digital fluoroscope isn't a diagnostic tool, but it's vital when performing such delicate diagnostic, pain-relieving procedures as nerve blocks. In these procedures, your doctor injects anti-inflammatory medication directly into the epidural layer of your spine. A fluoroscope makes the procedure possible.

### *MRIs*

Where X-rays and fluoroscopy show bones, an MRI can see soft tissue, revealing problems with your vertebral discs, inflamed nerves or even ligament, tendon and muscle damage. The MRI machine uses a giant tube into which you're rolled. The tube initiates a magnetic field. Radio waves sent through the tube at specific locations capture a cross-sectional image of your body.



When your spinal physician reads the MRI images, he often can determine the cause of your back pain. Nerve damage and inflamed tissue that doesn't show up on an X-ray can't hide from

an MRI. When an X-ray doesn't show any abnormalities, an MRI is often the next step in the diagnostic process.

### *Ultrasound*

Ultrasound is a diagnostic tool that uses sound waves instead of radiation. Therefore, it's the preferred method for testing pregnant patients and others for whom an X-ray is either unsafe or unwise. Like an MRI, an ultrasound gives your spine doctor a view of your soft tissue.

Often used to see muscle inflammation or tears, this is the same technology used to view fetuses. Your doctor often uses a gel on the surface of your skin, passing a handheld device back and forth across your skin. The live images are sent to a monitor.

When you have back pain, your doctor at SSI has the tools he needs to isolate the cause of your pain. He orders an X-ray, a fluoroscope, an MRI or an ultrasound depending on what he suspects the cause is. All these procedures are safe and painless. Contact the spine specialists at SSI to get the right test for the right reason.

## Chapter 10

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### *Healing As You Age*

**A**s your body changes, so do its healing abilities. While remaining young at heart is admirable, science and our bodies (with physical evidence like graying hair and wrinkles) say otherwise. The older we get, the more care we need to take, especially when we treat back pain. Back care becomes more important as we age because of the effect aging has on how our bodies heal.

According to Science Daily, studies are being performed on why aging “causes broken bones to heal slowly, or not at all.” The evidence is inconclusive so far, but research continues. Aging baby boomers demand answers, and a strained health care system needs some relief — back care costs about \$50 billion in the United States alone, as 50 percent of working Americans report some type of back pain every year.

#### *The Effects of Age*

Even if you are still active, your body’s ability to heal diminishes over time. It’s a natural process. Muscles shrink, tendons become more brittle and your ability to convert food into energy slows down. Your vertebral bones and discs become more fragile, which

can lead to spinal fractures and curvature of the spine. None of this is destined to happen, but it becomes more likely as you age.

You can help keep your body vibrant with regular exercise, a healthful diet and a positive attitude. Still, because advancing age reduces your body's ability to heal as quickly, you must allow for a longer recovery time, whether you've just had a surgical procedure or are working through physical therapy.



### *The Hidden Danger of Osteoporosis*

Accidents happen, and if you have broken a bone, ask your doctor to check if you are undergoing the onset of osteoporosis. If you're older than 50, you may already be suffering from this disease.

Osteoporosis causes your bones to become more brittle and susceptible to fractures. Most women are tested for the condition as

part of their routine health care, but men are susceptible to the condition as well.

While osteoporosis has few symptoms (until you break a bone), a bone mineral density test is easy and painless. It can determine if you have the disease. If you do, your spine physician at the Southeastern Spine Institute can help you take steps to prevent further breaks and fractures.

### *Treating Osteoporosis*

If you have osteoporosis, bone doctors recommend that you take a calcium supplement. Calcium helps build strong bones, even if you are at an advanced age. Most Americans don't get enough in their diets. You can buy supplements without a prescription at most drug stores.

Vitamin D and more protein are other dietary suggestions to keep you healthy. Vitamin D helps your body absorb the calcium. Protein keeps your body strong and healing properly. If you want to heal faster and more thoroughly, increase the amount of protein you consume.

On the other side of the dietary coin is sodium. Salt, the common form of sodium, causes your body to flush calcium in your urine. The more salt you consume, the more calcium goes down the toilet, so most doctors suggest a low-sodium diet for women 50 or older and for men older than 70.

### *Finding Lasting Cures*

The physicians at Southeastern Spine Institute specialize in back care, and they care about their patients' overall well-being. If you are in pain, don't wait until you break a bone. Come in to have a bone mineral density test to determine if you have osteoporosis.

Only then can your spine physician develop an effective plan to treat back pain.

Your age factors into your treatment plan. Obviously, spinal medicine is different for an eight-year-old than for a 68-year-old. The specialists at SSI understand the healing issues that come with age. They'll create a plan for recovery that takes into consideration a host of factors — including your youthful attitude.

## Chapter 11

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### *Managing Your Medications*

Whether you undergo minimally invasive back surgery or have a more intensive procedure that requires a longer rehabilitation, you can expect to experience some pain. Even the most experienced spine surgeons, like your doctors at the Southeastern Spine Institute, must maneuver around muscle tissue and nerve roots to fix your back problems.



No matter how severe your pain is, managing it properly can shorten your recovery process. Controlling your pain also plays a significant role in your long-term recovery. So prior to your surgery, your doctor should prepare you for the type of pain you'll experience during your recovery and set up a plan for managing that discomfort.

### *Make a Back Surgery Recovery Plan*

With the help of your doctor and your recovery team — which includes your physical therapist and your caregivers at home, you can get through the initial pain after your procedure with little or no interruptions. Your pain management plan must include realistic expectations, as well as methods for dealing with pain when it arises.

Postoperative pain is inevitable. Follow these tips to get through it effectively:

- Talk to your spine doctor before the back surgery about the various options for pain control. Let him know if you've had issues with pain meds in the past, if you have addiction problems or if you just prefer to use the least amount of narcotic relief possible.
- Discuss pain medication options such as heat and ice, relaxation techniques and the use of non-narcotic pain relievers.
- Alert the clinical staff about your pain levels after your procedure to help them determine the best approach to pain management after you leave the facility.
- Appoint a caregiver in advance to manage your medications. Rely on your support network so you don't have to worry about anything except healing.



- Follow the directions on the prescriptions, which may require you to take pain medication before you feel extreme pain. The stress from pain can actually slow your recovery.

### *Get It in Writing*

Your surgeon will prescribe medications for your recovery and provide instructions for taking them. But ask your surgeon to provide other instructions to help you manage pain and prevent complications after back surgery. For example, ask for:

- Recommendations for treating constipation, a common postoperative condition
- Instructions for how to avoid over-medication
- What over-the-counter remedies are safe for you to take
- Suggestions for the best positions to help you get to sleep
- What kind of back brace might be appropriate
- When you can shower and what precautions are required
- Which appliances, such as toilet risers and walkers, may help you when you get home
- Tips for the best diet to promote healing, while preventing nausea and constipation

Before you go to your pre-operative appointment with your back surgeon and his team, write down all the questions you can think of to ask. You can relax when you know that you've planned for everything for your recovery, including managing your pain. Put together a straightforward plan with clear instructions.

And don't forget to plan fun activities for your recovery from back surgery. Pick up your favorite movies, video games and books before you need them.

## Chapter 12

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# *When Are Orthopedic Shoes Necessary?*

**Y**our back is connected to your hips, which are connected to your legs and then to your ankles and feet. With such a direct connection, it's no wonder that the shoes you wear play such an integral role in preventing back and leg pain.



Your spine doctors at the Southeast Spine Institute can help determine if you are wearing the appropriate size and shape shoes for your lifestyle. If you're active, it becomes especially important. So seek help if you complain of back problems with related leg pain.

### *Direct Connection to Back and Leg Pain*

Though it may seem a long distance from your back to your favorite four-inch heels, your feet form the foundation upon which your back relies. Without the proper support on your feet, your back pays a price. Shoes that are too flat and open, such as flip-flops, can lead to arch pain that radiates up to your legs and back. Alternatively, high heels throw your entire body out of alignment, placing undue pressure on your spine.

Your gait — the way you walk — affects your entire body. The most common long-term foot problems that can lead to back pain include:

- Underpronation, when your arches don't roll sufficiently
- Overpronation, when your feet roll inward improperly

Overpronation causes a chain reaction when your body rotates inward as you walk. The awkward movement leads to unnecessary stress on your lower back. If you suffer from overpronation, chances are that you have very little natural arch support.

Underpronation, on the other hand, causes inadequate shock absorption, which pulses upward to your back, jarring the discs in your spine. You may have very rigid, high arches that cause you to underpronate when you walk.

Other foot problems that can lead to back pain include bunions, plantar fasciitis and nerve pain in your feet, often caused by tarsal tunnel syndrome. All these symptoms can be treated.

## *Orthopedic Inserts Can Help*

Whether your gait abnormalities are due to genetics or you developed the condition after years of wearing inappropriate footwear, orthopedic shoe inserts often can help relieve your back pain. Your Charleston spine doctors may refer you to a podiatrist who can make custom orthotics if they determine that your gait is the primary source of your back and leg pain.

Custom-made inserts are orthotics designed to treat your specific gait problem. They may provide an artificial arch if you overpronate or correct your gait to relieve the pressure on your spine if you underpronate. Orthotics are simple to use. You slide them into your ordinary shoes each day. Granted, they won't work well with stilettos, but by then, you probably aren't wearing those anymore anyway.

## *When the Shoe Fits*

Orthopedic shoes may be a better option if the inserts don't alleviate your back and leg pain. But you don't have to resort to the old-maid orthopedic shoes your grandmother wore. Many shoe companies understand the necessity for proper foot support and make orthopedic shoes that are both stylish and corrective. Your spine doctors can assess your progress once you've tried them out.

Shoe manufacturers such as Dansko, Vionic, Propet, Merrell and Clarks make shoes designed to treat foot problems and the associated back and leg pain. Many of the styles even are covered by insurance. So if you're suffering from leg pain, let the spine doctors at the Southeastern Spine Institute help you find the best fit for your feet. Remember: good health beats high fashion any day.

## Chapter 13

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# *When Should Children See a Back Specialist?*

**B**ack pain in children is very different from back pain in adults. When children complain of soreness or aching in their backs, they should see a back specialist as soon as possible, because more often than not, there is another, underlying medical issue.



Even though it may not be serious, get it checked out when your child complains of back pain. The spine physicians at the Southeastern Spine Institute know what to look for. They can provide the kind of examination that children need before proceeding to the appropriate treatment. Children under four years old are especially at risk for more serious complications when they complain of back pain that's also accompanied by:

- Fever
- Weight loss
- Bladder or bowel problems
- Difficulty walking
- Numbness
- Weakness

### *Watch for the Signs*

When your child's back pain prevents him from sleeping through the night, set up an appointment with a spine specialist. When your child has difficulty walking or moving at his usual pace, that's a sure sign that there's something going on that needs immediate attention. Back pain that shoots down the leg sometimes indicates nerve damage.

Sometimes, back pain in children is accompanied by few or no other symptoms, such as in cases of scoliosis. Scoliosis refers to an abnormal curvature of the spine. While scoliosis is more common in girls, it can affect children of all ages. It usually shows up when your child goes through a growth spurt. The cause of scoliosis is unknown; some symptoms can include:

- Uneven shoulders or hips
- Back pain in children

- Complaints of fatigue after standing or sitting for long periods of time
- Noticeable spine curvature

### *Steps Taken by the Doctor*

Your back specialist performs a complete exam that usually includes X-rays to determine the extent of the problem. Keep track of back pain in children so that you can tell the doctor when the problem began. This helps determine if the pain was the result of an injury, overuse or other underlying problem. Your doctor needs to know if the pain has worsened over time or if it only flares up at certain times.

The doctor will perform a physical exam of your child to examine the spinal bones, muscles and nerves. Lab tests often are given to determine if your child has an infection or inflammation that is causing the back pain. An MRI may be ordered if your doctor suspects scoliosis.

### *Common Back Problems in Children*

Most back pain in children is caused by muscle strain and responds well to rest, special exercises and anti-inflammatory medication. More serious conditions that create back pain in children include:

- Infection
- Slipped vertebrae
- Rounded back
- Stress fracture
- Tumor

Before you get too worried, have your child tested. It's never too early to bring your child in for an exam if he complains about back

pain. Because it is not common for children to experience back pain like adults do, it's worth a visit to ease your mind and catch any underlying conditions early. Serious complications are rare. But it's always better to play it safe and leave the diagnosis to the professionals at the Southeastern Spine Institute.

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For more information on preventing back pain and avoiding spinal surgery, contact the specialists at the Southeastern Spine Institute:

- 1106 Chuck Dawley Boulevard, Mt. Pleasant, SC 29464
- (866) 774- 6350 or 1-866-SPINE-50
- [www.southeasternspine.com](http://www.southeasternspine.com)