

The Truth  About Health

OFTEN UNNECESSARY COMPLEX SPINAL FUSION OPERATIONS ARE
SKYROCKETING — DOUBLE THE RISK OF
DEATH AND TRIPLE THE COSTS OF SIMPLER SURGERIES

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The number of complex lower back spinal fusions, where multiple vertebrae are bonded together in an effort to stabilize the back and relieve painful pressure on the nerves, has skyrocketed to 15 times more than just a few years ago.

A new study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* says the number of complex fusions increased from 1.3 per 100,000 people to 19.9 per 100,000 people between 2002 and 2007 among Medicare recipients.

While complex fusion surgeries increased in the five-year period, simple fusion and decompression procedures decreased, the *JAMA* study said. Complex fusions to treat spinal stenosis, or narrowing, of the lower back have barely a 60 percent satisfaction rate among patients; are more than three times as expensive as single fusions and decompressions, and yet carry double the risk of life-threatening complications, according to the study.

The question as to why these more dangerous and complex operations are increasing has no easy answer, the study noted. It is certainly not because the number of patients with complex spinal problems increased 15-fold in the past few years.

“The introduction and marketing of new surgical devices and the influence of key opinion leaders may stimulate more invasive surgery, even in the absence of new indications,” write the study authors. “Surgeons may believe more aggressive intervention produces better outcomes. Improvements in surgical technique, anesthetic technique, and supportive care may make more invasive surgery feasible when risks formerly would have been prohibitive. Financial incentives to hospitals and surgeons for more complex procedures may play a role, as may desires of surgeons to belocalinnovators.”

While the *JAMA* study suggests that the risk-to-benefit ratio of complex fusions might be questionable, some critics are suggesting that the procedures may be more beneficial to the surgeons than their patients. In an editorial accompanying the study, Dr. Eugene J. Carragee of Stanford University recommends a “careful assessment” of the risks and benefits, but then notes that the considerable income generated by these more complex surgeries make it difficult for patients to receive such an unbiased assessment from their surgeons, and is creating “a formidable economic and social problem.”

The low satisfaction rate among patients for complex fusions, the dangers of the procedures and the exorbitant increase in costs — about \$81,000 compared with \$24,000 for single fusions and decompressions — underscore the importance of trying alternative treatments before deciding on surgery.

The most common alternative to surgery for back pain, and the favorite among most patients, are the various techniques employed by chiropractors to realign vertebrae, relax muscle spasms and often to correct diet and lifestyle habits that are contributing to the tensions that can torque a back into painful misalignment.

Another growing favorite among Americans is the ancient Chinese practice of Acupuncture, which has already garnered wide acceptance by Western allopathic doctors both here and abroad for its remarkable ability to relieve pain and encourage the body to heal itself.

Low back pain

Neck pain

SOURCES: JAMA and Archives Journals, April 2010, Rate of complex spinal fusion procedures for lower back has increased among older adults, <http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/short/303/13/1259>.
ScienceDaily, April 2010, <http://www.sciencedaily.com-/releases/2010/04/100406162931.htm>