Lumbar Fusion - Arm Yourself with Facts and Say Goodbye to Your Worry!

by Gary Carty

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Any sort of surgery be it lumbar fusion or cervical fusion fills us with apprehension as they seem to be something very difficult. Although these surgeries are definitely not minor in nature, a few facts about them should put our apprehensions to rest and give us the courage to go ahead with it if necessary.

Our spine consists of 24 vertebrae each of which is kept apart by a disc to separate and give cushioning to the bones. With age the lower back vertebrae or the lumbar vertebrae starts degenerating and these results in lower back pain. However, any sudden jolt can push these vertebrae out of position and make the bones rub against each other and the spinal nerve. This may result in lower back pain, leg pain, weakness, tingling or numbness in the legs even in young people. Most cases become alright with medications, rest and exercise but some may continue to experience excruciating pain. When this pain becomes debilitating, physicians may recommend lumbar fusion.

Lumbar fusion is a process whereby the surgeon fuses two lumbar vertebrae together so that the area gets stabilized. This helps the nerves to have an unobstructed path which reduces the chances of pain recurring. This type of surgery involves removal of the intervertebral disc which is the cause of the problem along with removal of bone spurs, if any which may be obstructing the spinal cord. A bone graft is then inserted between the two vertebrae so that the original space remains. The bone graft can be donated by the patient himself or it can be acquired from a bone bank. Coming from the patientâ€™s own body, the bone graft definitely has an advantage but this also means an additional surgery wherein the bone is taken from the hip usually. This procedure may lengthen the time for recovery.

A bone graft from a bone bank may reduce the healing period but it may not fuse as well with the patientsâ€™ body. In both cases, metallic plates and screws have to be inserted to give support to the vertebrae while the bones fuse. Once the fusion is complete, the vertebrae becomes like one large bone which significantly reduces chances of further pain recurring. This surgery has proved to be highly successful in providing stability to the affected area and fusion has been seen to occur in over 80% of the cases. The recovery period can take as much as six to eight months but like in any other surgery, it is no guarantee that the pain will not recur. It only aids in minimizing the chances of it occurring again.

Cervical fusion means surgery in the upper spine by fusing the vertebrae in the neck. This also involves the usage of a bone graft to fuse two bones. The reasons for undergoing cervical surgery include a herniated cervical disc which causes either pain in the arms or localized pain and which must be removed before the fusion surgery can take place. Both surgeries have a high success rate and in the hands of a good surgeon there is no reason to doubt its success.

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