



QUESTIONS QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ANSWERS

When is Back Surgery Needed?

Back surgery is needed for several reasons, including:

- Taking pressure off of a nerve
- Fixing a broken bone
- Supporting a damaged part of the backbone, also called the spine

What are the signs that back surgery may be needed?

- Pain that travels down the leg
- Weakness, tingling or loss of feeling in the legs
- Very bad back pain
- Breakdown of the spine due to aging or arthritis
- A spine that is twisted or is not a normal shape
- Trouble walking

What are the different types of back problems?

Below is a list of back problems. After that is a list of the kinds of surgery needed to correct them. Ask your doctor which kind of back problem you have and the kind of surgery you need.

- **Herniated Disc:** The pads that sit between the bones in the spine are called discs. Discs act like cushions. They keep the bones in the back from rubbing against each other. Sometimes a disc may bulge out and part of it may move from its normal place. A part of the disc may press on a nerve. This can cause pain, tingling or weakness.

- **Disc Degeneration:** Wear and tear can flatten a disc. When this happens, the disc no longer acts as a cushion. The spine cannot move easily. Over time, the bones of the spine wear down. This causes pain.
- **Spinal Stenosis:** The spinal cord canal is an opening in the spine where the nerves pass through. This opening can become narrow. This may be due to bony growths called **spurs** or a disc that has flattened, causing the bones in the spine to rub against each other. This can be corrected by removing the piece of bone that is pinching a nerve or the spinal cord
- **Fracture:** An injury to the back that causes a bone to break. Surgery may be needed if the bones in the spine have been twisted, or if the spinal cord or nerves are being squeezed.

What are the different types of back surgeries?

- **Laminotomy or Laminectomy:** This surgery is done to remove pressure on a nerve. It is also done to provide the surgeon a way to get to a disc that is pressing on a nerve.
- **Discectomy:** This surgery is done to remove part of a disc to take pressure off of a nerve.
- **Fusion:** This surgery fastens two or more bones in the spine together. In this surgery, a disc is removed and replaced with small pieces of bone. This bone may come from some part of your body or from a bone bank.

Sometimes the surgeon may strengthen and straighten the spine by using such things as:

- Screws
- Rods
- Wire
- Metal cages
- Plates

What happens during the surgery?

- You may be asleep during surgery, or you may be awake but have no feeling from the waist down. Your doctor will talk to you about which choice to make.

- The surgeon will make a cut over the problem area. This cut is called an **incision**. The surgeon will then do one of the surgeries listed above.

What happens after the surgery?

- After surgery, a large bandage will be placed over your incision. You may also have a drainage tube.
- A special kind of stocking will be put on your legs to reduce the risk of blood clots.
- Several tubes, called IV lines, will be attached to your arm to supply you with the following:
 - antibiotics (medications that fight germs)
 - pain medication
 - fluids
 - nutrition
- A tube, called a **catheter**, which is used to drain urine, may be attached to you during surgery. It will be removed after surgery.
- After surgery, you will be moved to the recovery room until you wake up.
- When you are awake, you will be taken to your hospital room.

What will happen during my hospital stay?

- The hospital stay usually lasts one to two days. It will take from three months to one year for full recovery.
- You will feel some pain. You will get pain medication to help you feel as comfortable as possible.
- Your surgeon may ask you to wear a brace for a few months. This will help with healing.
- You will be asked to walk the same evening of the surgery or the next day. This will help speed your recovery. You may have to use a walker at first if you are unsteady.

Who will help me recover after surgery?

A **physical therapist** will meet you the day after your surgery. The physical therapist will teach you how to do the following:

- Put on your brace
- Do exercises that will help prevent blood clots
- Do exercises that will help you move more easily
- Use a walker, if necessary
- Stand correctly as you do your daily activities

The physical therapist will also tell you what to avoid after surgery. **Here is a list of things you must not do:**

- Bend forward
- Twist at the waist
- Place your knees higher than your hips
- Cross your legs at the knees or ankles
- Lift anything over five pounds
- Push or pull anything

An **occupational therapist** will also meet with you the day after your surgery. The occupational therapist will teach you how to use special aids to help you while you:

- Shower or bathe
- Use the toilet
- Dress yourself
- Do house work

The occupational therapist will also teach you to use an aid for deep breathing exercises. You may also get breathing treatments from a therapist.

A **Case Manager** will visit you to talk about your needs at home. Some people may need to go to a rehabilitation hospital for a short while before they go home.

How should I prepare for my return home?

Here are a few things you can do to make your home safer.

- Plan to live on the first floor for a short while after surgery. Avoid stairs.
- If stairs are necessary, make sure that all stair rails are bolted tightly to the wall.
- Sit in a firm chair with arm rests.
- Put another cushion on your chair if it is low. It is easier to get up from a chair if your hips are higher than your knees.
- Get a raised toilet seat.
- Use a shower bench or chair. It is safer to sit while taking a shower.
- Take up all loose carpets and cords so you do not trip.
- For a few days you may need help with cleaning, laundry and grocery shopping.

Going home instructions from your surgeon

You will go home with stitches or steri-strips along your incision. You must be careful about your incision.

- Do not soak the incision until it is completely dry and sealed.
- Keep a bandage over the incision so your clothes do not rub against it.
- Do not put **anything** on your incision, including creams, oils or liquids.
- Wear your brace.

What exercises should I do?

Do the exercises you learned in the hospital every day. You may have to do special exercises, called **physical therapy**. In some cases, you can do these exercises at home. You may have to go to a physical therapy center. Your surgeon will talk to you about this.

Start walking indoors every day. You can walk outside later. Start slowly and do a little more each day. You should be able to go back to mild activity within three to six weeks.

Special instructions:

- Avoid hard house work or yard work
- Avoid driving for a few weeks after surgery

You may not feel like eating much after surgery. This is common. **Try to eat well-balanced meals and drink lots of liquids.**

Complications

Blood Clots

Blood clots may occur during the first few weeks after surgery. **Be sure to follow all of your surgeon's instructions to prevent blood clots, including wearing your special stockings.** Take the stockings off every day. Take a careful look at your skin. Put them back on the next day.

What are the warning signs of blood clots?

Call your doctor right away if you have any of the following:

- Increased pain in the calf - **do not rub this area.**
- Tenderness or redness on the area above the knee
- Increased swelling of your calf, ankle or foot
- Sudden shortness of breath or chest pain – **This may indicate that a blood clot has moved to your lung.**

Infection

Infection is another problem that may happen after surgery. **Call your doctor right away if you have any of the following:**

- A fever over 100 degrees that does not go away
- Shaking or chills
- Increased redness, tenderness or swelling at the incision
- Draining from the incision
- Increased pain at the incision, whether you are moving or resting

How can I avoid problems after surgery?

Take a look below to learn about the possible problems that can occur after surgery. To avoid these problems, follow the instructions in the right column.

Problems

Blood clots

Precautions

Wear your special anti-clot stockings.
Take your medications.
Do your exercises.

Pneumonia

Start moving around as soon as you can,
Do your deep breathing exercises.

Infection

Take your medications.
Keep the incision clean and dry.

Other Problems

- The bone fusion may not be successful.
- A metal implant may break.
- A disc may rupture again.

Follow your doctor's instructions if you have any of these problems.

After Back Surgery

- Some numbness, tingling or pain in the back or down the leg is normal.
- You may have a little pain or weakness for some time. It can take weeks, months or years to recover.
- If the pain gets worse, cut down on your physical activity and **call your doctor.**

- It is important to walk after back surgery because it keeps you from getting stiff. Walking also helps prevent scar tissue from forming.
- Exercise regularly to keep your muscles in good shape. Talk to your doctor or physical therapist about which exercises are best for you.
- Learn to do activities without straining your back. Talk to your doctor or physical therapist about safe ways to lift, carry, bend and stretch.
- Control your weight to reduce the strain on your back.

How can I find a Doctor?

St. Vincent Charity Hospital has doctors who have special training in the treatment of back problems. To contact one of our doctors, please call:

Physician Referral Line at 1.800.223.8662

Visit our Web site at www.stvincentcharity.com

St. Vincent Charity Hospital

Cleveland, Ohio 44115

216.861.6200

TTY: Ohio Relay 1.800.750.0750

The HealthCare Center at Saint Luke's Pointe

Cleveland, Ohio 44104

216.721.6900

St. Vincent Charity Hospital Rehabilitation Services at 216.363.2410

American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons at www.orthoinfo.aaos.org

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