

## Sacroiliac Joint Fusion

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### **Introduction**

I prepared this handout to help review and answer some common questions about spine surgery. Some aspects of this guide may not apply exactly to your case and it is not intended to supersede our discussion. Please feel free to reach out to me if you have any questions.

### **What are the Sacroiliac Joints?**

The sacroiliac joints are the connections between the spine and the pelvis. The SI joints are located in the low back about waist level about 2-3 inches from the middle (near the dimples in the low back). Although they are “joints,” they do not move much. The sacroiliac joints do not rotate or open or close in normal circumstances. They function as shock absorbers between the spine and the pelvis. SI joint provides a stable back to the pelvic ring and holds the socket of the hip joint in place.

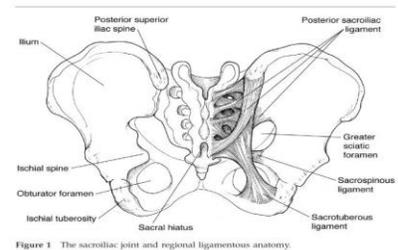
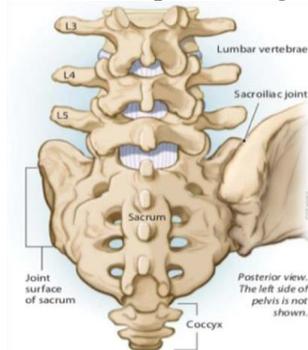


Figure 1 The sacroiliac joint and regional ligamentous anatomy.

You have two sacroiliac joints (on the right and left sides). The SI joints are located in the low back about waist level about 2-3 inches from the middle (near the dimples in the low back).



### ***Why Does My SI Joint Hurt?***

Occasionally, the sacroiliac joint can deteriorate or become injured following an accident. The ligaments that hold the joints together can become torn or damaged.

### ***Where do I feel sacroiliac joint pain?***

The sacroiliac joint pain is most commonly felt on the back near the beltline. However, sacroiliac joint pain can also travel into the hips and groin bilaterally. Sacroiliac joint pain is usually triggered by transitional movements (going from sitting to standing, for example).



### ***How Do You Diagnose SI Joint Pain?***

With physical exam, I can manipulate your legs and pelvis to apply pressure to the sacroiliac joints. The intention of these tests is to prevent the spine from moving while pressuring the sacroiliac joints.

### ***How Do You Treat SI Joint Pain?***

The first treatment is usually nonsurgical. Physical therapy and/or Chiropractic manipulation are often helpful to stretch the joint and strengthen the pelvic muscles.

If the above interventions are unsuccessful, then I will recommend two injections into the sacroiliac joints. The injections are a steroid and a local anesthetic.

If you have pain relief following the SI joint numbing, then that is a confirmatory diagnostic test that the sacroiliac joint is the cause of the pain. With most injections, we look at the results two weeks after the injections when the steroids become active. However, with SI joint injections, I am interested in the period right after the injections (2-4 hours) when the pain medication is active.

### ***Why Do I Need Surgery?***

I recommend surgery when the symptoms interfere with your quality of life and when no other reasonable alternatives are available.

### ***When Is Surgery the Right Option for Me?***

In most cases, surgery is the last option. If the injections and therapy are not successful, then surgery may be an option.

### ***What Can I Do Other Than Surgery?***

For the sacroiliac joints, the only other option is nerve ablation (burning or otherwise removing pain nerves in a small injection procedure). The nerve ablation has somewhat inconsistent, unpredictable results.

### ***What is your practice focus? Do you perform other orthopedic surgeries?***

I exclusively practice spinal surgery. I do not perform any other aspects of orthopedic surgery (such as hip replacement, shoulder surgery) so that I can stay focused on the latest techniques and literature in spine surgery.

### ***Do you perform nonsurgical treatments such as injections?***

No. I do not perform nonsurgical treatments such as injections, manipulation, chiropractic, acupuncture, physical therapy, or prescribe long term pain medications or cannabis. I can certainly give you some information and prescribe some nonsurgical treatments. However, I also have excellent specialists in my group who focus on non-surgical spine care to whom I can refer you for additional information about options to treat the spine other than surgery.

### ***What is a pain management specialist?***

A pain management specialist is a doctor who focuses on treatment of pain by means other than surgery. Several different medical specialties train on pain management, including physiatry, anesthesiology, and psychiatry.

### ***What do pain management specialists do?***

Pain management specialists perform nonsurgical treatments such as injections in the spine. Pain management specialists prescribe and to some extent supervise physical therapy. Pain management specialists also can prescribe and supervise pain medication prescriptions called “medical management.”

### ***What Are the Types of Surgery that Are Available to Treat This Condition?***

For the sacroiliac joint, the only surgery that is currently available is a fusion. There are no sacroiliac joint replacements.

### ***So Is the Pain Coming from My Back or My SI Joint? I Thought That I Had a Back Problem Such as Herniated Discs or Spinal Stenosis.***

The sacroiliac joints are located so close to the back that patients often “self diagnose” as a back problem. The examination is the key to confirming that the sacroiliac joints are in fact the pain generator.

### ***What is the Goal of Surgery?***

With most spinal surgery, the goal of surgery is to fuse the sacroiliac joints to prevent motion, impingement, bone on bone rubbing, and pain.

### ***What is Going to Happen to Me?***

The surgery involves placing instrumentation across the sacroiliac joints under an xray camera.

#### PROCEDURE

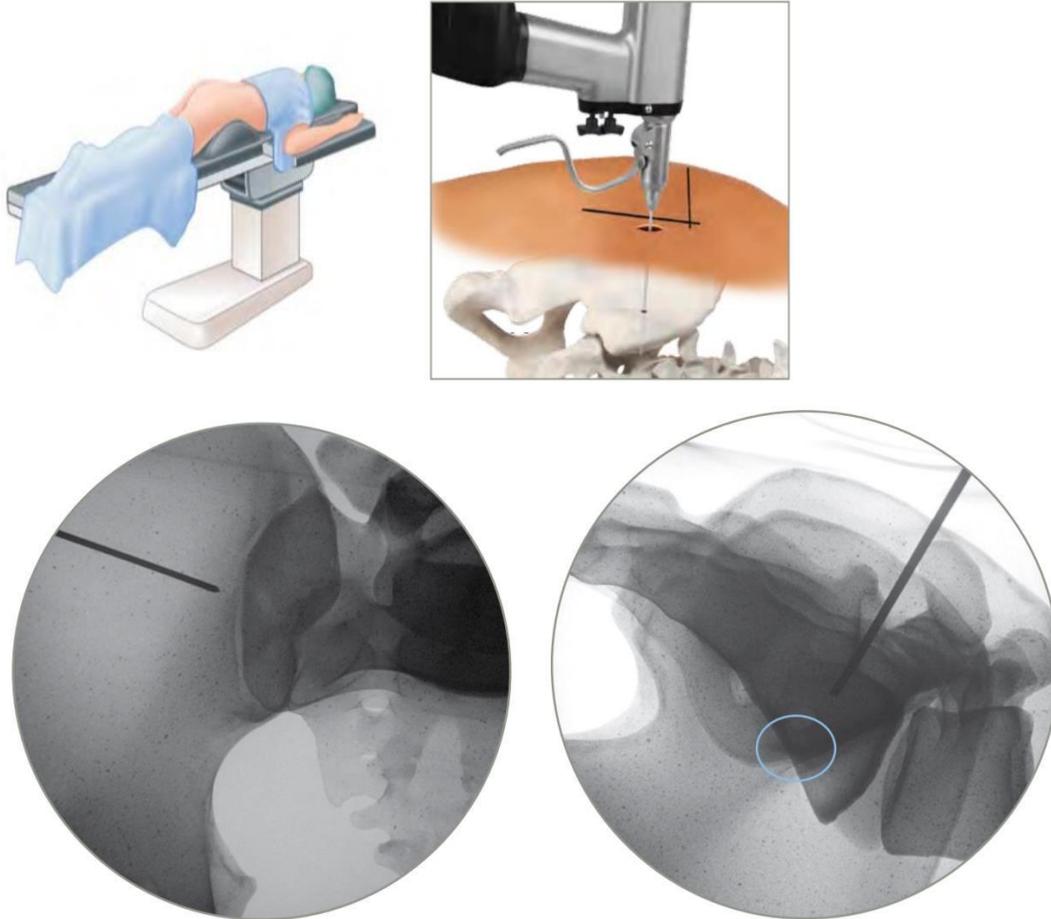
### ***Will I have an incision?***

Yes. You will have a 2-3 inch incision on the side of your thigh. I carefully dissect the fat, muscles, and ligaments aside to expose the spine. Care is taken to spread the muscle as much as possible to avoid cutting muscle.

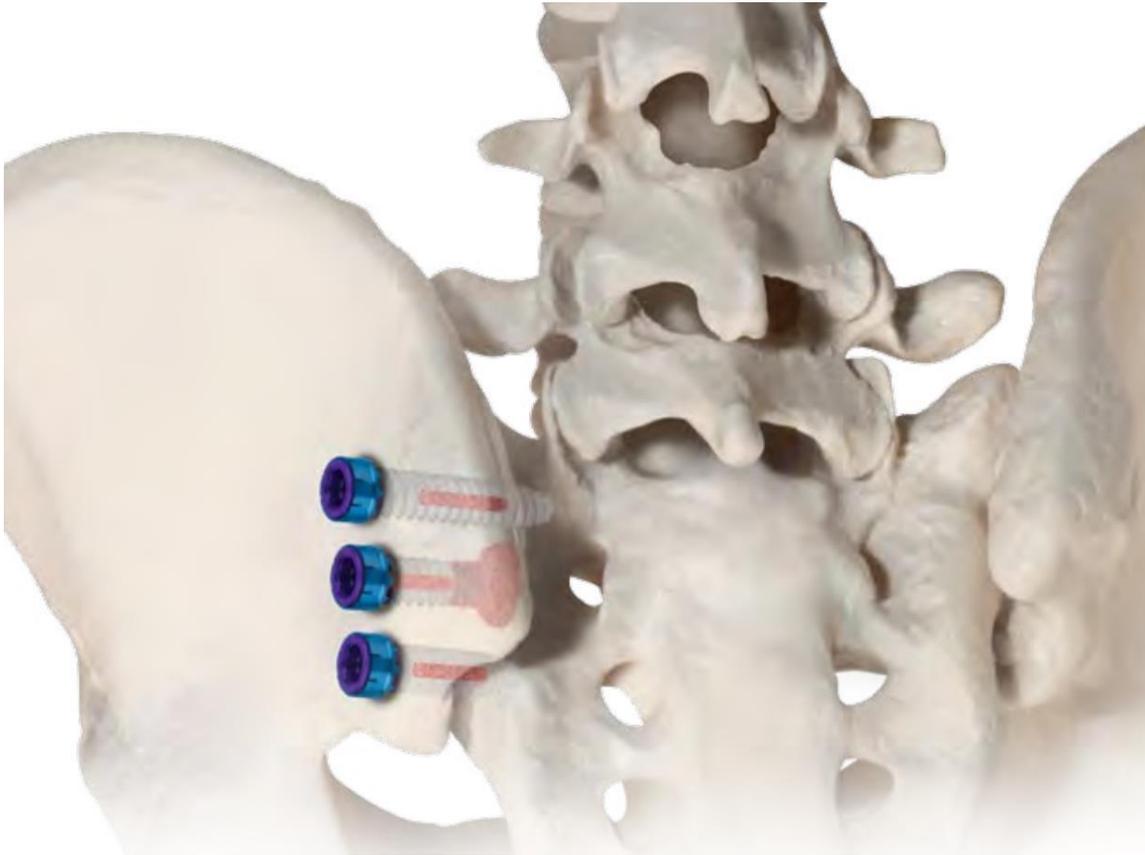
### ***What Makes It “Minimally Invasive”?***

The original technique for SI fusion involved a long incision and complete disruption of the muscles on the back. This technique goes through the muscles without cutting the muscles.

I will drill a small wire across the SI joint under an xray camera.



I will place screws over the wire to ensure a precise position. The screws are packed with bone. I usually place three screws.



***What happens then?***

The incision will be thoroughly cleaned to reduce the risk of infection. The incision will be closed with dissolvable sutures.

***How Long Does the Surgery Take?***

Typically, surgery takes about 1 hour

***How long do I stay in the hospital?***

The surgery is usually an outpatient surgery. Most patients go home on the same day.

***What does fusion mean?***

Fusion means that two or more bones merge together and become a single bone. In this case, the sacrum and the pelvis will become connected and essentially act as a single bone. The fusion will eliminate movement between sacrum and the pelvis.

***Where Does the Bone Inside of the Screws Come from?***

In most cases, I use bone from an organ donor.

***What happens if the bone graft fails to heal?***

If the bone inside of the screws does not grow, eventually the screws will lose their purchase and will become loose. That is called a failed fusion or a “pseudarthrosis.” If that happens, you will have persistent pain.

***What are some risk factors for the bone graft to fail to heal?***

The main reason for the fusion to fail is smoking. Other causes, including soft bone (osteopenia or osteoporosis), steroid use, diabetes, and other medical conditions affecting the immune system are big risk factors for not fusing successfully.

***Will I Have Screws?***

Yes. The screws will stabilize the sacroiliac joint.

***Will the Screws Be Connected By A Rod or Plate?***

No. The screws are not connected by a rod or a plate.

***Why do I need screws?***

The screws hold the sacrum and pelvis together to prevent motion. Bone grows into and along the screws. The surgery cannot be done without screws. Fusion requires immobilization.

***What are the downsides of a screws?***

If the fusion does not take, the screws may break or disengage and there may be loss of spinal correction. Sometimes screws have to be removed after surgery especially if the patient is allergic to metal.

***Will you see other areas and fix other areas in the surgery?***

No. I will not even see the sacroiliac joints on this case. I will only see the skin and xrays of the joints.

***Can you see nerve damage at the time of surgery?***

No. The nerves are encased within a thin membrane called dura. I do not see the nerves directly.

***Can I have an MRI with all of that metal?***

Yes. The screws are MRI compatible.

***Will I go off in the airport?***

It is very unlikely.

***Will Be Paralyzed After This Surgery?***

No. Since this surgery involves fusing two bones and not necessarily working on the nerves, paralysis is not possible.

***Will the surgery address bone spurs and stenosis also?***

No. I will not see the spinal canal or spinal nerves.

***Will you also check for herniated discs during the laminectomy?*** No. I will not see the discs.

***What kind of anesthesia is used?***

You will be under general anesthesia.

***How long do I stay in the hospital?***

This is an outpatient surgery. Most patients do not spend the night in the hospital.

***How Much Motion Will I Lose?***

The sacroiliac joints have very little movement. You will probably not notice a difference. Many patients actually report MORE motion after surgery because prior to surgery they often have reduced motion due to pain.

OUTCOME

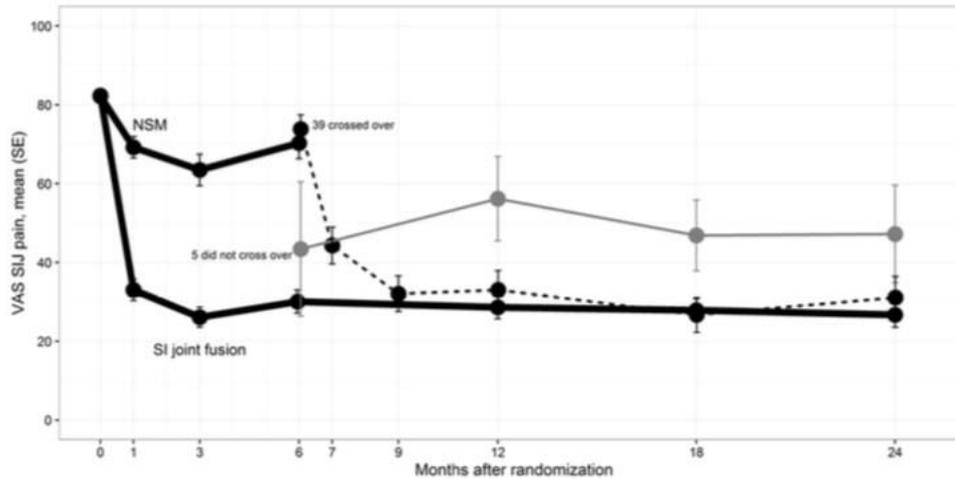
***What Is the Expected Outcome?***

Your pain will be better. However, I cannot promise that you will be pain free. Surgery can help improve function and decrease pain, but surgery is fundamentally fixing something “broken.” It is important to focus on this and to mentally prepare yourself so that you put yourself on a reasonably successful path to recovery. Believe me, I would love it if you had a perfect recovery. I just cannot promise that.

***What is the overall recovery period from SI fusion?***

The overall recovery period is 3-6 months is the typical recovery period. Here are the data from the largest study on sacroiliac joint fusion. At two years, the majority of patients had significant improvement in SI joint pain.

Take a look at the graph below. Most patients (the solid black line) started at an 8/10 pain and reached a 2-3/10 pain following surgery. The result was durable for two years.



***have had problems for a long time before surgery. Will that affect my outcome?***

Patients who have had longstanding problems and are de-conditioned before surgery will require longer postoperative rehabilitation.

***Do statistics guarantee that a specific amount of improvement for me?***

No. Although the statistics are helpful to understand the overall outcome for many patients, they do not guarantee the odds of success or failure in any individual case. With any surgical procedure, some patients are improved, some patients are unchanged, and some patients have worse symptoms. There is some variability in how quickly patients improve following surgery.

***When can I expect pain to be reduced?***

Patients' leg pain is usually improved/reduced immediately after surgery

***When can I expect weakness to improve?***

You should not be weak following the sacroiliac fusion. Sacroiliac joint problems do not normally cause weakness.

***When can I expect numbness to improve?***

You should not be numb following the sacroiliac fusion. Sacroiliac joint problems do not normally cause numbness.

***Will my back hurt more after surgery?***

Yes. People often have more pain in the back over the muscles. That pain is most likely due to the change in mechanics of the spine and sacroiliac joints.

***What can I take for the back pain and stiffness?***

You will be given muscle relaxers to treat the pain and stiffness in the back. I suggest that you use them instead of opioid medications.

***Do my medical conditions affect the outcome of surgery?***

To some extent. Some medical conditions such as obesity, smoking, osteoporosis, scoliosis or deformity, history of cancer, history of previous spine surgery, poor nutrition, noncompliance, diabetes, autoimmune conditions, and being on blood thinners affect the outcome of surgery and the risk of complications. For example, being on blood thinners increases your risk of epidural hematoma and bleeding.

***Will I need a catheter in my bladder?***

No

***What if I cannot move my bowels after surgery?***

After surgery, constipation frequently occurs from inactivity and the side effects of pain medication. Stool softeners and laxatives will be available from your nurse. Once you go home, you can also take some over the counter stool softeners and laxatives. Use of opioid pain medication and prolonged rest may cause constipation. Drinking plenty of fluids and eating high fiber foods (whole grains, raw fruits, and vegetables) will help regain normal bowel function.

***What can I do to help move my bowels?***

Chewing gum! Chewing gum helps to activate the bowels.

***What if I lose control of my urination or bowels after surgery?***

That could be an emergency! Tell your nurse or call me immediately.

***What if I am numb around my genital (private area)? Is that normal?***

No! That is never normal. Tell your nurse or call me immediately.

AFTER THE OPERATION

***Will you speak to my family?***

Yes. After surgery, I will meet with your family in the surgical waiting room unless otherwise arranged. If I miss them, don't worry. I will find them later. My cellphone is 609-225-4804 if for some reason they don't hear from me.

### ***Will Other Doctors Will See Me After Surgery?***

Medical doctors will also consult on your case after surgery if you stay in the hospital.

### ***What do the medical doctors do?***

They will see you before surgery in Preadmission testing. These providers have almost decades of experience caring for patients who have undergone spine surgery. They will check your “non-spinal” parts including your heart, lungs, kidneys, etc. They will order the labs that they believe are necessary for you to safely get through surgery. They will review your clearance. They may order additional tests (EKG, echocardiograms, etc.).

### ***Do I need a clearance from my own primary care or cardiologist?***

Yes. You should check with them and have them send over a clearance letter. However, you will still have to go to preadmission testing and undergo a second clearance process based upon our hospital standards.

### ***So, my clearance from my primary care doctor or cardiologist may not be enough?***

Yes. Each hospital has different rules and standards. Part of our success has been with increased scrutiny for preadmission testing. Your internist or cardiologist may not be as familiar with the surgery as our hospital doctors are. Our medical specialists often order additional tests to ensure that you will be safe in surgery based upon their knowledge of the surgery.

### ***Where does Dr. Radcliff perform surgery?***

Capital Health Medical Center (Hopewell). 1 Capital Way, Pennington, NJ 08534. (800) 637-2374. <https://www.capitalhealth.org/>

Robert Wood Johnson (Hamilton). 1 Hamilton Health Pl, Hamilton Township, NJ 08690. (609) 586-7900. <https://www.rwjbh.org/rwj-university-hospital-hamilton/>

Shore Medical Center 100 Medical Center Way, Somers Point, NJ 08244 (609) 653-3500 <https://shoremedicalcenter.org/>

Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, 132 S 10th St, Philadelphia, PA 19107, 215-955-6000, <https://www.jeffersonhealth.org/index.html>

### ***What is the process for testing and clearance prior to surgery?***

You will have to go to the hospital where your surgery is planned to obtain “clearance.”

***How long does it take to get cleared for surgery?***

It depends on your health. If you are healthy and regularly see a physician, it could be only 5-7 days. If you have severe health problems, it could take a month or more.

***Who will tell me about my medicines (diabetes medicines, blood pressure medicines, blood thinners, etc.) before surgery?***

The medical doctors in the preadmission testing center will give you specific recommendations.

***Do I need to stop aspirin for my heart before surgery?***

No. Do not stop taking aspirin if your doctor has told you to take it.

***Who will see me after surgery?***

It is likely that you will go home on the day of surgery. If you stay overnight, you will see the same doctors who saw you in the pre-admission testing center will also see you while you are in the hospital. I believe that the best possible outcome occurs when the medical doctors meet you beforehand, learn about your medical needs, and then follow you after surgery. They will function like your primary care doctors in the hospital.

***Is the surgery very painful?***

No. I am committed to making your surgery as painless as possible. I have developed an advanced protocol to control your pain after surgery. A group of doctors, including our anesthesiologists, medical doctors, nurses, physician assistants, and myself reviewed medical studies and created a comprehensive protocol to control your pain. We start pain medications before your surgery even begins! During surgery, we run specialized intravenous continuous drips that prevent your body's pain receptor nerves from ever becoming activated.

With this protocol in place, we have achieved postoperative pain scores that are in the **97-99<sup>th</sup> percentile** for hospitals within the United States based on a recent survey. We also reduced patient's opioid consumption 30%.

If needed, you will have access to Percocet, Roxicodone, or Vicodin. I will also prescribe Dilaudid for intravenous pain medication if needed. However, the opioid medications can create constipation and urinary retention, so use them with care.

***When does the pain management protocol start?***

Before surgery. It is reinforced during surgery. It is further implemented after surgery.

***Will I have access to opioid medication if I need them?***

Opioid pain medication will be available for pain relief after surgery. The possible effects vary among patients and may include: sleepiness, nausea, constipation, flushing, sweating, and occasionally euphoria or confused feelings.

### ***What can I do before surgery to control my pain after surgery?***

It is important that you reduce your opioid medication prior to surgery. By decreasing your tolerance your body may respond better to postoperative pain medications such as these opioids.

### ***Will I Have To Wear A Brace?***

No

### ***Will I Need A Walker?***

Possibly. If you need a walker or a raised toilet seat, I will give you a prescription for one.

### ***Will I Have A Cane?***

No

### ***What can I do to prepare for activities after surgery?***

Activities that include bending/twisting/lifting such as laundry, grocery shopping, caring for pets should be left for others to care for, to avoid potential injury. Possible items to create a safer environment are listed below.

- ***A “grabber” device.*** Bending and reaching up can be avoided with this lightweight tool, often sold at pharmacies and discount stores.
- ***Toilet and shower equipment.*** Adding a shower mat, toilet riser, and a shower seat makes the bathroom safer and easier to use. Home health equipment is often covered by insurance.
- ***A cane or walker.*** Patients who think a cane or walker would help them feel more stable can discuss this option with the surgeon.
- ***A mini-fridge or cooler.*** Keeping cool drinks and ice packs close at hand helps patients avoid climbing stairs more than necessary.
- ***A recliner or extra cushions.*** The seating position in a recliner takes some pressure off the lower back. Sitting on a cushioned surface is also likely to be more comfortable.

- **Fall prevention.** It is best to remove anything that may be a tripping hazard, such as loose rugs or clutter. Some people also install handrails as needed, such as on stairs or in the shower.

### ***Why Do I Feel Exhausted After Surgery?***

It is very common to feel run down a couple weeks after surgery because your body is getting acclimated to the new changes in your body. You should walk around to help increase blood flow throughout your body. Shifting positions frequently between standing, sitting, and lying down are good to help avoid pain/stiffness. Gradually increasing physical activities are good, but should be stopped if you start to experience increasing pain or exhaustion. You should not do activities that require bending at the waist and lifting anything over 15 pounds or a gallon of milk.

### ***Do I have sleep in a recliner?***

No. Sleep in whatever position is most comfortable. If you like to sleep in a recliner feel free to do so.

### ***Can I have sleep in my bed?***

Yes. Sleep in whatever position is most comfortable. If you like to sleep in your bed feel free to do so.

### ***Do I need to sleep in a hospital bed?***

No. Most patients are most comfortable in their own beds.

### ***Can I move when I sleep? Can I sleep on my side?***

Yes. You will not do damage to your back from sleeping in a certain position or turning when you sleep.

### ***Are there specific pillows or mattresses that you recommend?***

No. Pillows and mattresses are very individualized. Many of my patients like shredded memory foam pillows, however.

### ***Will I need physical therapy?***

Perhaps. Regular exercise, including physical therapy, is thought to help prevent binding of the lumbar roots through fibrous adhesions called epidural fibrosis. Specific stretches can help reduce effects of postoperative scarring around the nerve root resulting in better outcomes. Therapy can also improve blood flow which will help your nerve heal and muscle heal. You will begin exercising and moving immediately after surgery. You may be able to do the exercises on your own to recondition your spine. If you have special

circumstances, then I will order physical therapy. I usually wait for the incision to heal and for early healing to occur. If necessary, I will prescribe physical therapy at about one month after surgery.

***Will I need inpatient rehab?***

No. The most important rehab is to walk as much as possible.

***If do I need inpatient rehab where should I go?***

I suggest that you contact your insurance. Popular rehabilitation facilities include Moss, Magee, Kessler, Bacharach.

***Will I be able to stand and walk after surgery?***

Yes. The nurse or therapist will assist you in getting out of bed a few hours after surgery. You will be instructed to be up walking every 2 to 3 hours during the day and evening. The nurse will allow you to do this independently once you are steady and feel comfortable.

***Is activity helpful for my recovery?***

Yes. Early activity after surgery is extremely important to help prevent the complications of prolonged bed rest such as pneumonia and blood clots. It also promotes recovery, relieves muscle stiffness, allows for development of a well-organized scar, and improves your outlook.

***Can I start my own exercise program with a trainer or someone?***

No. Please do not start any exercise programs unless discussed with me.

***What are the lifting restrictions after surgery?***

15lbs for the first six weeks. That is the weight of two gallons of milk. Lifting weights increases stress and pressure on the lumbar spine and surgical site. I would like the area to heal before we increase your activity tolerance.

***What do postoperative x-rays show?***

The x-rays show the bones and help to confirm that the bones have not shifted following the surgery.

***Do I need to have x-rays to advance my weight limit and tolerance?***

No. I base the decision to advance your weightbearing on your pain, activity tolerance, bone quality, and your preferences.

***Can I damage my back from turning my back doing routine things such as talking or driving?***

No. You will not do damage to your back just from routine activities and driving. In fact, the motion will help to recondition your back muscles.

***Why is there a limit on back motion (90 degrees) if I cannot damage the back with activity?***

I worry about extreme bending and craning your back. You will not do damage to your back just from routine activities such as talking on the telephone, typing, and minor recreational activities.

***When can I resume running and bicycling?***

I worry about the repetitive loading to your back. I suggest that you wait six weeks at least.

***When can I resume golf?***

Six to twelve weeks

***When can I resume sedentary (office) work with a 10lb limit?***

The earliest is 2-3 weeks to resume desk (sedentary) work. Most patients do not get back to light work until about six weeks.

***When can I resume heavy work with a 50lb or more limit?***

The earliest is 10 weeks to resume heavy work. Most patients do not get back to heavy work until about 4 months after surgery. It is possible that you will never be able to resume heavy work.

***Will you do disability forms for me?***

Yes. You must start the disability process. If your employer requires documentation of your work status, our office will provide the necessary information to your employer or other concerned parties. All disability matters must be handled through the office (so that the paperwork is filed and stamped in the Rothman charts). Please do not bring disability paperwork to the hospital.

***When can I go out of work?***

In general, I will take you out of work from the date of surgery. I cannot take you out of work prior to the date of my initial visit with you

***Can I smoke nicotine products?***

Smoking is absolutely forbidden. There is clear evidence that smoking dramatically increases your risk of post-operative complications. Most insurances will deny surgery if you smoke and will make you get urine nicotine testing. You should avoid tobacco exposure for at least six weeks prior to surgery and for two years after surgery. Second hand smoke also applies.

### ***Can I use cannabis?***

I do not know. There is little research on cannabis either way because it remains a federally illegal substance. I do not have a license to prescribe cannabis.

### ***When can I bathe?***

You should sponge bath only for the first week after surgery.

### ***Should I get the incision wet?***

After postoperative day 5

### ***Can I soak the incision underwater?***

Please do not soak the incision under water (either in a bath tub or in a swimming pool or the ocean) prior to the postoperative check at two weeks.

### ***Can I apply ointments to the incision?***

No. Do not apply any ointments or creams.

### ***What can I eat after surgery?***

Your diet will begin with clear liquids, and be advanced to a regular diet as soon as your condition permits.

### ***What can I do to help my breathing after surgery?***

Deep breathing is very important after surgery to maintain lung expansion and reduce the risk of pneumonia. You will be provided with an incentive spirometer and instructed about its use. This device should be used every 15 to 30 minutes during your wakeful hours initially, then every 1 to 2 hours as your activity returns to normal. This device is yours to take home. Continue to use it at home for at least 1 week after your discharge. (Use it during TV commercial breaks).

### ***Can I use smokeless tobacco?***

You should avoid tobacco exposure for at least six weeks prior to surgery and for two years after surgery. Second hand smoke also applies.

### ***What will hold the skin together?***

Absorbable sutures which are buried. On the outside there will be crazy glue (Dermabond).

***When are the postop appointments?***

2 weeks, 6 weeks, 3 months, 6 months, 1 year and 2 years from surgery.

***Do I see Dr. Radcliff at every visit?***

No. The 2-week visit is usually a wound check done with my physician assistant. I am of course always around and available.

***When should I call?***

Please take your temperature every afternoon for the first week after you are discharged from the hospital. Call your physician at 609-952-5243 if:

1. Your temperature is more than 101.5 degrees,
2. Your incision becomes reddened, swollen
3. You develop any problems urinating or passing bowel movements.
4. You develop any worsening numbness or weakness, especially numbness on your buttocks.
5. Any increase or change in drainage occurs.
6. You develop headaches, light sensitivity, or other serious concerns?
7. You have any other serious concerns.

***Does diet affect my healing?***

Yes. A well-balanced diet is necessary for good healing and recovery. This includes food from the four basic food groups: dairy products, meat, vegetables, and fruit.

***Are specific vitamins necessary for healing?***

You should take a multivitamin. You should also take a combination Vitamin D supplement/calcium supplement daily for six months. During this healing period, your calcium and Vitamin D requirements are increased. One brand that I commonly recommend is Os-Cal D

***Can you call in a refill of opioid medications after hours?***

Opioid pain medications cannot be refilled at night or over the weekend, or holiday.

***What are the laws in New Jersey about pain medications?***

In New Jersey, there is a recent law that only ***five day prescriptions*** of opioid pain medications can be given to a patient in moderate to severe acute pain

[http://www.nj.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/02/bill\\_limitig\\_painkiller\\_prescription\\_on\\_christies.html](http://www.nj.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/02/bill_limitig_painkiller_prescription_on_christies.html)).

### ***How bad is the opioid problem in New Jersey?***

New Jersey is ranked 45th in the nation in the number of opioid prescriptions, but third in the nation in overdoses, primarily overdoses of heroin, either alone in combination with Fentanyl. Published data from the New Jersey Medical Examiner's Office shows there were 1,587 drug overdose deaths in 2015, up 21 percent from the year before. Heroin deaths also rose significantly, to 918, the highest level since official records were kept in New Jersey. More than 30,000 Americans died in 2015 from overdoses of prescription opioids and heroin, an epidemic widely considered by many to be the product of overprescribing of pain medicines. Data from the CDC show that the rate of heroin and fentanyl deaths in New Jersey have started to far outpace the national average. In 2015, nearly 1600 people drug of drug overdose representing a 22% increase from the previous year.

### ***What if the patient needs more than 5 days of pain medication?***

To address concerns about patients with pain that exceeds 5 days, the law allows physicians to easily add another 5 days to the original opioid prescription if the patient's pain has not subsided.

### ***What if I need opioids after the first five days?***

If you need even short term opioids beyond the first refill, I will refer you to a pain management specialist.

### ***When will you refer me to a pain management specialist?***

I may refer you to a pain management specialist

1. If you still need opioid pain medication OR
2. If you need strong, long acting pain medication OR
3. IF you have a history of treating with a pain management physician

### ***Are you in most major insurance networks?***

Yes. We take all major insurances. In general, if you can see me in the office, I am in your insurance network. Before surgery, my office will precertify the surgery codes with your insurance and will notify you of potential charges and insurance participation.

### ***Is the hospital in network?***

Yes. In fact, before surgery, my office will confirm that your surgery is covered by insurance. If needed, please feel free to contact my prior authorization representative Brittany Herron, Surgical Precert, (267) 339-3543. All the hospital physicians, including

the ER doctors, radiologists, anesthesiologists, hospitalists, etc. are also in network.

***Do you have any out of network assistants?***

No

***What are the insurance company criteria for surgery? Who writes them?***

Each insurance company has its own specific criteria to determine when a surgery is appropriate which they call “medically necessary.” The criteria are quite subjective and often change.

***What if surgery is denied?***

If that happens, I will do a call with another physician to review your case. Usually that first level appeal occurs with a non-spine physician such as a pediatrician or gynecologist. If that appeal is unsuccessful, then the second level appeal occurs with a spine specialist. It can take over a month.

COMPLICATIONS

***What Kinds of Complications Can Occur?***

There are three categories of complications after spine surgery: perioperative complications (which generally occur immediately after surgery), long term outcome (at six to twelve months after surgery), and the risk of additional procedures in the future. Although I endeavor to list all complications that a reasonable person would want to know, there is always a possibility of other, unforeseen rare complications occurring. There are other, more rare complications, that can occur that are not always possible to anticipate or list.

***What are anesthesia related complications of laminectomy surgery?***

Some complications that can occur after anesthesia include blindness, shoulder injury, brachial plexus injury, anesthesia reaction, transfusion reaction, and even death. Some patients may need a special type of intubation such as indirect laryngoscopy (Glide scope) or awake fiber optic intubation.

***What are the general complications that can occur after any surgery?***

Some complications that can occur after any surgery include pneumonia, deep venous thrombosis (blood clots), phlebitis, pulmonary embolism, renal failure, heart attack, cardiac arrest, stroke, aspiration pneumonia, delayed bowel function (ileus), urinary

retention (from genitourinary problems other than neurogenic bladder), C. Diff infection, diarrhea, worsening vision or blindness, blood loss, allergic reaction to medications, and even death.

***What are the specific complications of a sacroiliac fusion?***

The most common complications are that the sacroiliac joint fusion will not “take” or occur. The other complication is damage to the hip muscles. There are several nerves and blood vessels around the hips which can be damaged but that is very unlikely.

***What are the other complications that can occur following a spinal surgery?***

Some of the possible complications following any surgery on the spine include persistent pain/failure to alleviate symptoms or worsening symptoms, worse postoperative pain, other organ injury, neurogenic bladder (usually from spinal cord injury), neurogenic bowel, sexual dysfunction, instability of the spine, need for further surgery/reoperation, non-improvement, prolonged intubation, arachnoid cyst, and arachnoiditis (i.e., scarring of the nerves in the dural sac).

***What are the other risks of spine surgery?***

The risks of surgery have been well studied. The table below is taken from a published reference that is commonly used in England called the International Spine Surgery Information Sheet. These rates are not necessarily my own personal rates. They are the rates published in the medical literature.

**SPECIFIC RISKS & COMPLICATIONS**

Relevant to you	Complication	Leading to	Odds
	Nerve root injury	Pain/weakness/numbness in the arm / leg. The impairment may be temporary or permanent.	1 in 60
	Damage to the nerves supplying the bladder (cauda equina syndrome)	No control or reduced control passing urine or faeces. Weakness and/or numbness in the legs.	1 in 100
	Tear of the lining of spinal canal (dura)	Headache and a leaky wound. Occasionally a second operation to repair the tear (1 in 300).	1 in 20
	Infection	Wound discharge, fever and chills.	1 in 50
	Wound swelling (Seroma)	Fluid collection under the skin. Majority amenable to aspiration alone. Occasionally wound is re-opened to drain.	1 in 60
	Recurrent disc herniation	Recurrence of pain requiring second operation either within a few days or at any time in the future.	1 in 20
	Respiratory	Need for support of ventilation. Occasionally emergency operation to relieve the obstruction (1 in 50)	1 in 30
	Oesophageal (gullet) injury	Difficulty with swallowing. Generally temporary. Re-operation to repair the oesophagus may be needed (1 in 100)	1 in 12
	Recurrent laryngeal nerve injury	Hoarse voice – temporary (common) or permanent (rare).	1 in 20
	Vertebral artery injury	Bleeding	1 in 300
	Failure of bone healing (non-union)	Persistent pain. Recurrence of deformity.	1 in 6
	Bone graft donor site pain	Pain.	1 in 8
	Hardware breakage / loosening, Dislocation of implant	Pain. Recurrent deformity. Probable second operation to re-position or remove any implant.	1 in 100
	Pedicle screw malposition	Weakness / numbness / bleeding / lung injury	1 in 25
	Intestine (gut) blockage (ileus)	Distended abdomen, vomiting and constipation.	1 in 100
	Retrograde ejaculation	Infertility.	1 in 75
	Spinal cord injury	Loss of arm and leg function: Quadriplegia / Paraplegia – permanent. Quadriparesis / Paraparesis – may be temporary or permanent.	1 in 250

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***What if you slip and lose control of the instruments?***

I am trained to handle the surgical instruments safely around the spine in a manner that is safe and avoids injury to vital structures.

***Ok. There are a lot of possible complications. What are the ones that I should really worry about?***

I really worry about bleeding (a hematoma) that can affect the hip muscles.

***What can you do surgically to prevent more disc herniations?***

I would have to remove the entire disc and fuse the level or perform an artificial disc replacement.

***What about infection? What do you do to prevent infection?***

I also worry about infection. An infection may present with wound drainage, fevers, chills, worsening pain, redness, weakness, numbness, tingling, or worsening trouble swallowing. I have done extensive research on infections and I go out of my way to take steps to reduce your risk of infection.

***Is it possible that I will need another surgery in the future?***

Yes. You may need another surgery in the future, either to treat a complication (such as if the sacroiliac joint does not fuse) or to treat pain or another spinal problem.

**Where can I look for additional information?**

A Better Way Back is an online information source with credible information. I strongly suggest that you review that program first before doing a Google Search.

Better way back has a section on basic spine anatomy.

<https://www.thebetterwayback.org/intro-to-spine/>

Better way back has a section on spine conditions.

<https://www.thebetterwayback.org/pain-and-conditions/>

Better way back has a section on treatments.

<https://www.thebetterwayback.org/treatment-options/>

Better way back has a section on advanced resources including a nationwide ambassador program that you can call or text and resources for your caregivers.

<https://www.thebetterwayback.org/patient-ambassadors/>

<https://www.thebetterwayback.org/emotional-support/>

<https://www.thebetterwayback.org/caregivers-guide/>

### ***The First Week***

- Early to bed, late to rise and frequent rest periods throughout the day. Get at least 8 hours of sleep each night. A disrupted sleep pattern is common after discharge from the hospital and will return to normal over time.
- You may not drive, but you may be driven, for short distances, using proper restraints such as shoulder and lap belts for 2-4 WEEKS.
- No lifting of more than 15 pounds.
- May climb stairs with hand rail
- Begin a daily walking program with 1 to 2 blocks initially; schedule a daily time and increase distance daily.
- Eat a regular, balanced diet with plenty of fiber
- Take medications as prescribed, using narcotics as needed.

### ***The Second Week***

- Resume normal rising and retiring schedule, but continue to rest throughout the day.
- Eat plenty of fiber
- You may not drive.
- No lifting of anything weighing more than 15 pounds.
- May climb stairs with hand rail
- Continue scheduled walking, increasing distance and frequency as able.
- May resume sexual relations when comfortable.
- Begin narcotic weaning as pain diminishes, relying mainly on non-narcotic medications
- Follow-up in the office as scheduled, for further instructions.

### ***The Third Week***

- May start physical therapy if needed
- Resume normal rising and retiring schedule, resting as needed.
- Resume driving
- May resume light work around the home; lifting not to exceed 15 pounds.
- Continue scheduled walking.
- May Resume Sedentary Work In Special Circumstances

### ***The Fourth Week***

- Resume normal rising and retiring schedule, resting as needed.
- May resume light work around the home; lifting not to exceed 15 pounds.
- Continue scheduled walking.

### ***The Sixth Week***

- Follow-up visit.
- Discontinue weight limit. Ok to lift more than 15 pounds but less than 30 lbs.
- Resume sedentary work in most circumstances
- Initiate physical therapy

### ***The Twelfth Week (3 Months)***

- Follow-up visit or call to the office to cancel if you are doing well
- Conclude physical therapy or initiate more intense physical therapy

### ***6 Months***

- Follow-up visit or call to the office to cancel if you are doing well
- Conclude physical therapy
- Resume intense work

### ***12 Months***

- Follow-up visit or call to the office to cancel if you are doing well

Glossary:

**acute:** a condition that progresses rapidly

**anesthetic:** an agent that causes loss of sensation with or without the loss of consciousness.

**anterolisthesis:** A forward slippage of one bone onto another bone. It can compress the nerve roots, causing pain.

**axial pain:** pain in the neck or back that does not travel into the extremities (arms and legs)

**bulge:** A broad type of disc herniation that occupies more than 25% of the circumference of the disc

**chronic:** a condition of slow progression that continues over a long period of time.

**central stenosis:** narrowing of the middle of the spinal canal where the nerves travel

**cerebrospinal fluid:** the water-like fluid that bathes the nerves

**corticosteroid:** a hormone produced by the adrenal gland or synthetically. Regulates salt and water balance and has an anti-inflammatory effect.

**cortisone:** the type of steroid used in most injections. Epidural injections involve an injection of cortisone. There are specific brands of cortisone such as depo-medrol, solu-medrol, and methylprednisolone.

**degeneration:** the process of deterioration of cartilage and tissues due to any number of factors. Degeneration can occur because of an injury (“My car accident caused my back to degenerative prematurely”), genetic factors (“My entire family has back problems”) or due to work.

**degenerative disc:** A breakdown or aging of the intervertebral disc causing collapse of the disc space, tears in the annulus, and growth of bone spurs. Degeneration is a form of arthritis.

**disc-osteophyte complex:** A combination of disc herniations and bone spurs due to spinal arthritis.

**dura:** the thin membrane surrounding the nerves that holds spinal fluid

**epidural injection:** A steroid injection into the spinal canal intended to reduce inflammation and pain given outside of the dura inside of the spinal canal. Cortisone is the most common type of steroid to be injected. Epidurals are also called nerve blocks. There are several different types of epidural injections that are differentiated by the location where the medication is injected. Some common types of epidural injections are interlaminar injections, transforaminal injections, selective nerve root blocks, and caudal epidural injections.

**epidural space:** the area between the membrane surrounding the spinal cord and the vertebral wall that is filled with fat and small blood vessels.

**extrusion:** A type of disc herniation which has a broader dome than a neck and/or extends above or below the disc level (and thus migrates)

**fluoroscopy:** an imaging device that uses x-ray or other radiation to view structures in the body in real time, or “live.” Also called a C-arm.

**foraminal stenosis:** narrowing of the tunnels where the nerves exit the spinal canal

**herniated disc:** The gel-like material within the disc can bulge or rupture through a weak area in the surrounding wall (annulus). Irritation, pain, and swelling occur when this material squeezes out and meets a spinal nerve. Disc herniations can be subcategorized as “bulge, protrusion, extrusion, or sequestration”.

**interlaminar:** through the lamina.

**lateral recess stenosis:** narrowing of the side of the spinal canal where the nerves travel

**mild stenosis:** something occupying less than 1/3 of the spinal canal

**moderate stenosis:** something occupying between 1/3 to 2/3 of the spinal canal

**myelopathy:** A spinal cord disorder causing trouble with finger coordination, balance, and bowel/bladder control

**osteophyte:** A bone spur. It is a hardened section of disc or an overgrown section of bone

**protrusion:** A type of disc herniation that occupies less than 25% of the circumference of the disc

**radiculopathy:** a pinched spinal nerve causing pain generally in the arms and legs

**retrolisthesis:** A backward slippage of one bone onto another bone. It can compress the nerve roots, causing pain.

**sacroiliac joint injection:** A cortisone steroid injection into the sacroiliac joints (not the spine) intended to reduce inflammation and pain

**sciatica:** pain that courses along the sciatic nerve in the buttocks and down the legs. Usually caused by compression of the 5<sup>th</sup> lumbar or 1<sup>st</sup> sacral spinal nerves. A form of radiculopathy

**scoliosis:** left-right curvature of the spine that can occur in childhood (called adolescent) or in adulthood (called degenerative)

**sequestration:** A type of disc herniation which a piece of disc has broken off and has migrated

**severe stenosis:** something occupying more than 2/3 of the spinal canal

**spinal canal:** the round bony tube surrounding the nerves and spinal cord

**spinal stenosis:** A narrowing of the spinal canal and nerve root canal can cause back and leg pain, especially when walking.

**spondylolisthesis:** A slippage of one bone over another in the spine, causing instability.

**spondylolysis:** A weakness or fracture between the upper and lower facets of a vertebra. If the vertebra slips forward (spondylolisthesis), it can compress the nerve roots, causing pain.



***spondylosis:*** Degeneration (“drying up”) of the spinal discs associated with early spine arthritis