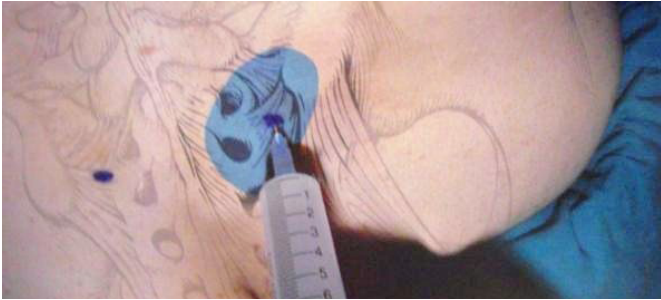


# Chronic low back pain

*Your treatment options. Your second opinion.*



## **What is Chronic low back pain**

Your low back may be affected by chronic pain, which is defined as constant pain on a daily basis for three months or more, during the past six months. In addition to your low back, you may also feel pain in your hip, leg and foot (also called sciatica) and other symptoms such as tingling, burning sensation and weakness in the leg and foot. These symptoms may vary from mild to severe.

While most episodes of low back pain get better quickly, either with non-surgical treatments or even without any treatment, for some people the pain continues. In fact, chronic low back pain may affect up to four in five people at least once in their lives. It's more likely the older you are.

A specific cause may often not be found for your chronic low back pain. The main reason is that low back pain may be caused by different structures such as joints, discs, nerves and muscles, however in most cases tests are unable to identify exactly which structure is causing your pain. Fortunately though, non-surgical treatments may often help achieve improvement, regardless of the structure at fault.

## **Treatment pathways**

When your low back pain becomes chronic, a physical examination and tests may be performed to check if a cause can be found that hasn't been previously identified.

If a cause is found, specific surgical procedures may be suggested, for example, laminectomy for spinal stenosis (pressure on spinal nerves), discectomy to treat a slipped disc and radiofrequency denervation, a surgical procedure for low back facet joint pain.

If no cause is found, a comprehensive program of non-surgical treatments may often be suggested as the initial treatment. They may also be suggested if a cause is found, but it's decided not to have surgery at this stage. However, if your pain fails to improve sufficiently after receiving non-surgical treatments, surgery may then be considered.

## **Non-surgical treatments**

A comprehensive program of non-surgical treatments for chronic low back pain may include medications and non-medication treatments, often in combination.

Medications may include:

- > Paracetamol and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) – in short courses and spinal epidural steroid injection, to decrease your pain and inflammation.
- > Muscle relaxants.
- > Gabapentin for tingling or burning sensation.

Non-medication treatments may include:

- > Exercises to strengthen muscles and improve core abdominal stability.
- > Psychological therapies to reduce your pain.
- > Acupuncture for pain reduction.
- > Gentle soft tissue physiotherapy and heat therapy.

## **Spinal fusion**

If you have severe chronic low back pain that doesn't have a specific cause and has failed to improve sufficiently after receiving non-surgical treatments, spinal fusion may be suggested to you as a 'last resort' treatment.

Spinal fusion involves uniting together two vertebrae (bones) of your spine to stop movement in the joints and disc that connect them and, in effect, make them a single, solid bone. The reasoning for suggesting spinal fusion is that movement between the vertebrae is the source of your chronic low back pain and stopping movement may reduce the pain. Spinal fusion techniques either involve an incision (cut) or minimally invasive keyhole surgery to access the spine to place bone material (graft) between the vertebrae to promote fusion. It may take several months for complete fusion to occur. During this time your back must be held in the correct posture and only gradually increased activity is allowed.

## **Non-surgical treatment program for you**

Medications may often begin with paracetamol and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs).

- > Finding reliable self-help advice and information.
- > Allowing your preferences to help guide decisions on non-surgical treatments.
- > Knowing that if your first treatment choice isn't successful, there are other non-surgical treatments available.

**Always consult a medical expert before commencing a course of treatment for any medical condition.**





Spinal fusion may also be suggested for chronic low back pain for specific causes, such as degenerative (osteoarthritis) changes to the joints and disc of the spine that leads to instability (excessive movement) between the vertebrae.

### **Spinal fusion and medical research**

When evaluating you for spinal fusion or other treatments for chronic low back pain, your treating medical specialist will take into account many complex factors, including the latest medical research.

Studies have found that for people with chronic low back pain, spinal fusion may often be no more effective for improving symptoms compared to non-surgical treatments that have been provided in a comprehensive program including exercises and psychological therapies.

However research has also found that spinal fusion may be effective for chronic low back pain that has failed to improve sufficiently after receiving non-surgical treatments in specific and particular cases, for example, when an accurate selection is made of people more likely to benefit due to the presence of degenerative changes.

### **Spinal fusion and risks**

The risks of spinal fusion include paralysis of leg/s, paraplegia, infection, bleeding, nerve damage, blood clots and failure of the bones to fuse, spinal fluid leak, prosthesis migration or failure which may require more surgery.

Understanding the risks is important, particularly given the possibility that spinal fusion may be no more effective than non-surgical treatments provided as a comprehensive program including exercises and psychological therapies.

### **Spinal fusion and chronic low back pain - the main points**

- > If you have severe chronic low back pain that doesn't have a specific cause and has failed to improve sufficiently after receiving non-surgical treatments, spinal fusion may be suggested to you.
- > If you're considering a spinal fusion, take into account the medical studies showing that spinal fusion may be no more effective compared to non-surgical treatments that are provided in a comprehensive program, including exercises and psychological therapies, and also the risks of spinal fusion.
- > If you're considering non-surgical treatments, you and your doctor may plan together how to put into practice a comprehensive program.

### **Would you like a second opinion?**

Deciding on a treatment path for a medical condition can be a difficult, complex and stressful question.

Would you like the benefit of an expert second opinion to decide on your treatment options?

**If you want to know more about GPS<sup>2</sup> or have a general enquiry, please contact us on 1800 477 246 or email via [contact@gps2.com.au](mailto:contact@gps2.com.au)**

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