

# Degenerative Disc Disease

One of the most common illnesses that are picked up on x-rays and MRIs is degenerative disc disease. This is a normal process of aging that occurs in the discs which, over time, as one ages become less resilient, smaller and, on some occasions, actually develop cracks in them (annular tears).

The fact is, if you had an MRI of most people over 40, they would show degenerative disc disease on the MRI but most of them would not complain of back pain at all.

Some patients with back pain have discs that are inflamed and torn and typically patients with back pain due to degenerative discs complain of pain that is well-localized in the back that does not radiate into the buttocks or down the leg.

The most common discs to become degenerated are the lumbar and cervical discs and these are also the discs that more commonly cause pain.

Patients who complain of back pain that is confined to the back are often treated with nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications, rest and even physical therapy. If they fail to improve, they are often referred for MRIs and subsequently referred to pain management consultants. Epidural steroid injections can be helpful in patients with this condition (see epidural injections under "TREATMENT").

Should epidural injections be performed and fail to provide the patient with benefit, then discograms are performed. Discograms are performed under x-ray control and x-ray dye is injected into the discs under controlled pressure. When a normal disc is injected, it first appears normal on the subsequent CT scan but also is not painful. Discs that do cause patients pain will also be painful when they are injected and it is the patient's response to the injected disc that determines which disc is causing the patient their pain. Once a surgeon knows which disc is causing the patient's pain, then spine surgery can be attempted.

There are some more recent procedures done that are less interventional than spine surgery, these include IDET. Unfortunately, these procedures are still being tested and many insurance carriers do not pay for them. The response rate to procedures like this is generally speaking not remarkably high and much of the success rate of the procedure depends on selecting the correct



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● Pain Referral

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