



DECISION AID

Slipped disc in the lower back: Is surgery an option for me?

You have a slipped disc in the lower back (lumbar region) and symptoms. Your doctor might have recommended surgery. In many situations, you have plenty of time to decide whether to have surgery or not. This decision aid aims to help you with that.

The spinal discs are found between the bones in the spine (vertebrae), where they act as shock absorbers. A slipped disc is usually the result of normal age-related changes in the spinal disc. Spinal disc tissue then protrudes from between the vertebrae and can press against and irritate the nerves around the spine. That can cause pain in the lower back that shoots into the leg (sciatica). The pain can be sudden and extreme, and then go away again. But the symptoms sometimes last for a long time or keep coming back in episodes.

THESE ARE THE TREATMENT OPTIONS:

Conservative therapy (without surgery):

- Exercise, relaxation and positioning
- Oral painkillers
- Physical therapy and occupational therapy
- Traditional Asian therapies such as acupuncture
- Injections near the spine to locally numb the nerves or stop inflammations
- Cognitive behavioral therapy

Conservative therapy options are sometimes also offered as multimodal treatment programs which combine several therapy approaches.

Surgical treatment:

- Removal of prolapsed spinal disc tissue, often during
 - open (microsurgical) surgery, or
 - endoscopic surgery

*You can read
about the pros
and cons of these
treatments on the
next pages.*

PERSONAL DECISION:

This decision aid probably won't include all of the information that you need. It is intended to help you prepare for doctor's appointments, not to replace them. Deciding whether to have treatment also depends on other factors such as your general state of health, your expectations of a procedure, which other treatments you have already tried, and how successful they were.

GOOD TO KNOW: Whether or not you want to have surgery is usually a personal decision that you can take your time over. Don't let anyone force you into choosing a certain treatment. Even if you find the symptoms very distressing, you can take your time to find the information you need and then make a decision.

IMPORTANT: Surgery is always necessary if a slipped disc is restricting your nerves so severely that the bladder or bowel no longer work properly (cauda equina syndrome) or your muscles are weakened (paralysis).

SUMMARY OF TREATMENT OPTIONS

	Conservative therapy	Surgery to remove spinal disc tissue
<p>What does the treatment involve?</p>	<p>Measures for relieving pain and improving mobility include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining as active a daily life as possible, while regularly exercising and taking the strain off the lower back • Relaxation exercises, in courses or at home • Over-the-counter painkillers such as ibuprofen; stronger painkillers such as opioids and muscle relaxants that are only available on prescription can be taken in the short term for severe pain • Physical therapy: Exercises, also done alone, patient education; loosening of muscles and joints • Occupational therapy: Practicing movement sequences and pain relief strategies • Traditional Far East therapies such as acupuncture • Injections near the spine of anti-inflammatory or local anesthetic medications • Cognitive behavioral therapy to develop new behavioral patterns to cope with pain <p>Combinations are possible, also as multimodal treatment programs.</p>	<p>Slipped disc surgery usually removes the spinal disc tissue that is pushing on the nerve. The aim is to give it more space so that the symptoms go away. Typical procedures are open and endoscopic surgery.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During open surgery, the surgeon monitors the area being operated on with a microscope and removes the damaged part of the spinal disc tissue. This procedure has to be done under general anesthetic. A slightly bigger incision in the skin is needed if no microscope is used. • Particularly small instruments are used during endoscopic surgery (also called minimally invasive surgery) meaning that only a small incision in the skin is needed. This procedure can be carried out under general or local anesthetic.
<p>Who is the treatment suitable for?</p>	<p>For all people who have symptoms caused by a slipped disc. The exact treatment depends on different factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How severe the pain is and how restricted your mobility is • How long the pain has already lasted • Whether the pain shoots into the leg (sciatica) • Which treatments you have already tried and how effective they were • Whether you have any other medical conditions • Whether possible interactions with other medications mean you can't take certain painkillers 	<p>For people who have symptoms caused by a slipped disc if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the symptoms are so severe that they significantly affect daily life, and • the pain shoots into the leg and hasn't gone away after 6 to 12 weeks, and • a slipped disc has been diagnosed using imaging techniques, usually magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and • the symptoms haven't gone away or have even gotten worse despite the use of conservative therapy.

SUMMARY OF TREATMENT OPTIONS

	Conservative therapy	Surgery to remove spinal disc tissue
How effective is treatment?	<p>The effectiveness of conservative therapies can vary from person to person. But most people are able to get their pain or mobility restrictions under control.</p> <p>Exercise helps you to keep fit and strengthen your back muscles. It also usually has a positive effect on your mood.</p> <p>There are suggestions that acupuncture can relieve pain.</p> <p>Injections near the spine can relieve pain that shoots into the leg (sciatica) for a few weeks.</p> <p>There is no research into whether certain treatments or combinations are more effective than others.</p>	<p>Both open and endoscopic procedures probably provide similar results.</p> <p>The pain quickly goes away after surgery. But studies found that after a year, there was no longer any difference in pain between people who had surgery and those who had conservative therapy.</p> <p>Mobility only improves a short while after surgery: Studies found that after about half a year, people who had surgery could move better than those who didn't.</p> <p>The time it takes for paralysis to disappear after surgery also depends on how severe it was beforehand. There is no guarantee that it won't come back after surgery.</p> <p>Rehabilitation therapy (follow-up treatment) after slipped disc surgery can speed up recovery and improve mobility.</p>
What side effects might there be?	<p>Anti-inflammatory painkillers like ibuprofen can cause stomach problems and mild bleeding such as nosebleeds, and sometimes also stomach ulcers, severe bleeding, or kidney dysfunctions.</p> <p>Strong painkillers can cause nausea, constipation, drowsiness, tiredness, or dizziness. A dry mouth, low blood pressure, or heart rhythm disorders are also possible. Some medications can cause dependence in the long term.</p> <p>Injections near the spine can cause secondary bleeding, infections, or nerve damage. If x-ray or CT scans are used for monitoring, there is also exposure to radiation.</p>	<p>Short-term side effects such as headache or nausea, and complications such as breathing and circulation problems, can also occur depending on the type of anesthetic.</p> <p>Possible, but rare, complications include infections, accidental damage to nerves and tissues in the area operated on, and bleeding due to blood vessel damage.</p> <p>Accompanying treatment with painkillers can cause side effects.</p>
What remains unanswered?	<p>Even though conservative therapy is most common, it is still unclear how effective these treatments are for slipped disc and how they can best be combined. There are only suggestions from studies into injections near the spine and for acupuncture that they can relieve symptoms.</p>	<p>There are no reliable results about how long the improvements in mobility last after surgery.</p> <p>There are no detailed studies into the long-term complications of surgery.</p>

HELP WITH YOUR DECISION

The previous table shows that there are no clear health benefits connected with surgery for a slipped disc in the lower back. But it is still possible that conservative therapy will not provide enough relief. So you may be unsure about which treatment you would prefer. You can write down your thoughts and questions on the following two pages.

Which treatment would I consider?		What do I like about it?	What don't I like about it?
Conservative therapy (also as a multimodal treatment program)	<input type="radio"/>		
Surgery to remove spinal disc tissue	<input type="radio"/>		

If you still aren't sure: What else do you need in order to make a decision?

The study results into the pros and cons of treatments can't answer every question. That can make it harder to make a decision. Whether surgery to remove spinal disc tissue is a good idea for you mainly depends on your personal situation, such as how severe your symptoms are and whether they haven't gone away despite conservative therapy.

If you need more help:

- You will find links to further information on the next page.
- You can talk to your doctor again.
- Get a second medical opinion. You will find information about this option on the next page, too.
- You can discuss the options with family and friends.
- Or you can contact a patient information center or a support group.



DECISION AID

Slipped disc in the lower back:

Is surgery an option for me?

You will find in-depth information about the following topics on the internet:

- Treatment options for slipped disc:
 - Exercise, medication, non-drug interventions:
www.informedhealth.org/non-surgical-treatment-options.html
 - Surgery:
www.informedhealth.org/surgery-for-a-slipped-disc.html
- Chronic back pain:
www.informedhealth.org/living-with-chronic-back-pain.html
- At the hospital:
www.informedhealth.org/at-the-hospital.html
- Surgery:
www.informedhealth.org/surgery.html
- Detailed information on second medical opinions:
www.informedhealth.org/SecondOpinion

Preparing for the doctor's appointment

What remains unanswered? What are you most concerned about? Write down any questions or thoughts you may have, and take this decision aid with you to the appointment. You can ask the doctor about anything you would like to know or discuss anything you are worried about.

You will find a list of questions – and can choose those that are most important to you – here:

- www.informedhealth.org/questions



DECISION AID

Slipped disc in the lower back: Is surgery an option for me?

Publishing details

This decision aid was developed by the Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG, Germany). You will find information about our work and the sources used here:

- www.informedhealth.org/our-approach

Stand 07/2023