

Ask the Expert– Backed up in pain

Mind Your Body, The Straits Times (Thursday, 1 January 2009)

Q: I am a woman in my early 40s and recently had an MRI after suffering from severe back pain. The results showed degenerative changes in my lumbar vertebrae and loss of normal high signal of the intervertebral discs. I consulted a physiotherapist and have had acupuncture treatment. Nothing helps. I wake up every day with aches in my lower back. The pain is bearable but I can't do heavy chores or sit down for long hours. Please tell me what to do to prevent the situation from worsening.

A: Degenerative disc disease is a relatively common ailment. It causes back pain and sometimes leg pain. Initial treatment will consist of pain medication, physiotherapy and acupuncture. There are other complementary measures like chiropractic treatment, pilates and yoga for pain management and to strengthen the back muscles.

Surgery is the last option. In your case, it sounds like surgery is an option you may like to consider. The most common procedures are either artificial disc replacement, where an incision is made in the front of the abdomen and an artificial disc is inserted after removing the degenerated disc, or a fusion.

In fusion surgery, the incision is made from the back and the disc is removed and replaced with bone.

You should consult an orthopaedic surgeon specialising in spine surgery. Meanwhile, you should watch your back posture and avoid heavy lifting, prolonged sitting and bending.

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