



# Spine Disorders: The Importance of Treating the Cause and Not Just the Symptoms

By Carrie Diulus, MD

When it comes to addressing spine issues, there are numerous options. Traditional spine care focuses on medication, physical therapy, surgery, injections, and in some cases, manipulation therapy. Deciding on which approach to take, depends on determining the root cause of a patient's condition. A comprehensive evaluation is the best starting point for figuring out the best treatment.

Such an in-depth evaluation can dramatically improve a patient's spine health as well as their overall well-being. For example, obesity places increased stress across the spine, which can lead to increased pain. Other conditions like diabetes and autoimmune diseases can cause nerve conditions that can imitate disc herniations and lumbar stenosis. Treating the end symptoms without addressing the underlying causes may help relieve symptoms temporarily, but may, unfortunately, not provide lasting relief.

In a spine practice, we see many patients who also have diabetes or pre-diabetes and have elevated markers of inflammation throughout their bodies. If we are able to effectively help patients reverse these conditions with lifestyle changes – including diet, exercise, supplements, and sometimes medication – we often secondarily improve their spine and nerve conditions as well.

Inactivity alone can be a significant contributing factor to spine-related pain. Prolonged sitting has clearly been shown to increase not only spine pain, but also other chronic health conditions. Sitting too much can quite literally shorten your life and increase your pain. Our spines need to be moved to gain nutrients, stay supple and heal.

Strong core and back muscles provide support for the back and neck as well. Without this strength, we can have pain even when attempting to maintain normal posture throughout the day. Working with patients, who are on the road to recovery, to plan a long-term fitness program helps not only prevent recurring spine problems, but also helps patients improve their overall health.

Expanding our "toolbox" to include all of the treatments that have been shown to be effective in spine care can often more quickly help a patient take control of their spine health. Many times, combining tools results in better outcomes than individual tools alone. Examples include combining physical therapy with medication, supplement therapy, massage therapy and yoga. Additionally, using tools that treat all of the factors a patient has affecting his or her spine improves outcomes. For example, using tools to improve weight and sleep can positively impact a patient's spine health.

I am often asked, "Why would a spine surgeon want to use an expanded toolbox and not just discuss surgery as an option when talking to patients?" While surgery can be very effective for some circumstances, it certainly does not address all spine problems. Additionally, when surgery is necessary, if we use additional tools from the spine wellness toolbox, we get better outcomes from surgical procedures with fewer complications.

Using a patient-centered approach, with the expanded spine wellness toolbox, helps to provide patients with a faster, more comprehensive approach to achieving spine wellness and can also improve their overall health.



*Dr. Diulus received her medical degree from Northeast Ohio Medical University. She completed three years of residency in anatomic and clinical pathology at Summa Health System in Akron. Her additional training includes a six-year residency program in orthopaedic surgery at the Cleveland Clinic. She also completed a spine fellowship with the SpineCare Medical Group in San Francisco. Today, she is one of just a handful of board-certified female orthopaedic spine surgeons in the country.*

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