

Spinal Fusion

What is spinal fusion?

Spinal fusion is a surgical procedure to correct bone problems of the spine by 'fusing' together two or more vertebrae.

Who can benefit from having spinal fusion?

There are several reasons why an individual may need to undergo spinal fusion. These include scoliosis (curvature of the spine), cerebral palsy and degenerative disc disease. Other reasons include reducing pain, fracture to the vertebrae, instability, cervical disc herniations and injury to the spine - among others.

Procedure

During the spinal fusion procedure, you will be placed under a general or spinal anesthetic. There are a variety of techniques used for spinal fusion, which all involve placing bone grafts between the affected vertebrae. These grafts are either taken from the spinal fusion patient, from a deceased donor or alternatively may be artificial. A posterior approach (incision in the back), anterior approach (incision in the front) or a combination of the two is used to access the spine and the grafts are set in place. The incision is then closed using staples or sutures. Following the procedure, the natural body tissue then begins to grow or around the grafts, helping to 'fuse' them together and strengthen the spine. These grafts may or may not be supported by metal screws, rods or plates - depending on the severity of the damage.

Recovery period

Your staples or sutures will be removed around 10-14 days following surgery. You may have a drainage tube left in the incision, which will need to be removed around 48 hours after the spinal fusion procedure. It is normal to experience a loss of appetite and energy, but this will begin to come back shortly. A physiotherapist will be assigned to you to help you strengthen the spine through specific exercises and advise you when you can return to your normal routine. You will experience some pain but will be given medication - orally or intravenously - to help alleviate this. You will be able to leave hospital around 7-10 days after surgery, however it may take between a few weeks and a few months before patients can return to work or school (healing time will depend on the type and extent of surgery). You will usually have to wear a brace following spinal fusion surgery to help support the spine.

Risks

Complications involving spinal fusion include infection, bleeding, nerve damage, displacement of supports (rods, screws or plates), and failure of the new bone to graft.