

Spine Care Companion: Module 2

My family keeps asking about my diagnosis. What should I tell them?

This handout explains what to expect during the diagnostic process, what slipped discs are, and when to ask for magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).

How long may it take to reach a diagnosis?

It is normal to want a clear diagnosis, and it can be frustrating when you do not have one. There are several facts to consider when it comes to diagnosing spinal conditions:

- Most back and neck problems do not include serious *structural damage* (damage to the bones and discs).
- Most spine problems improve with time. A clear diagnosis usually does not change natural recovery.
- Special testing, such as an MRI, does not always lead to a clear diagnosis. These tests may show findings that are not related to your pain. Sometimes, people recover quickly enough that an MRI is not necessary.

Your provider will do a careful medical history and physical exam. This is often the best way to learn how to guide you on the path to recovery. Your provider will determine if anything may delay your natural recovery.

However, if your pain does not improve enough after several weeks, your provider can work with you to reach a clearer diagnosis and treatment plan.

How can you tell if I have a “slipped disc”?

Discs are like cushions between each vertebra of the spine. Discs are connected to the vertebrae around them. They do not “slip” out of place when injured. The back edge of the disc may bulge or protrude depending on how severely it was injured.

If a disc is injured, pain may *radiate* (travel) down through your leg or arm due to pressure on the nerve root. This is called *radiculopathy* (sometimes known as *sciatica*).

Radiculopathy usually requires medical treatment, but can often be managed without surgery. In some cases, a surgical evaluation will need to be done if your symptoms do not improve.

Spinal Cord Injuries

It is not common to become paralyzed from a low back injury. Unless there is extreme traumatic force, it is very rare to have a spinal cord injury or paralysis.

Signs of a spinal cord injury usually include:

- Weakness or loss of ability to move the arms and/or legs
- Large areas of numbness or lack of sensation throughout the body
- Difficulty with coordination or balance
- Loss of control of bladder and/or bowel function

If you experience any of these symptoms, call 911 immediately.

When should I ask for imaging such as an MRI?

The physical examination and medical history are key parts of diagnosing spinal problems, especially when done by a specialist. Your provider will use the results of your exam to determine the source of your pain. In most cases, you will not need an imaging test.

You and your provider can discuss imaging if:

- Your spine pain goes down into your arm or leg and is not getting better after 4 to 6 weeks.
- You have had a major accident or injury.
- You have spine pain along with a fever or weight loss.
- You have a history of osteoporosis, cancer, or regular steroid use.
- You develop any other “red flags” described in Module 1, such as changes in bowel and bladder function, fever, or sudden loss of strength or sensation.

Your provider will probably not order an MRI in the first few weeks unless you have red flag symptoms. People often improve quickly enough that an MRI is not necessary.

When ordered too early, an MRI can lead to invasive procedures that are not necessary. This is because it is common to get abnormal results on an MRI that are not related to your pain. Ordering an MRI too early can lead to confusion and anxiety for both providers and patients. It may also interfere with the rehabilitation process.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.