

The benefits of minimally invasive spine surgery



Often patients needing spinal surgery are overwhelmed by the options and terminology coming their way. Yet full understanding of the necessary procedure is vital. It is important that you choose a surgeon who you can communicate with and who will help you understand and navigate the many different issues. Unfortunately, we don't always know what we think we know. For example, the term "Minimally Invasive Surgery," often referred to as "MIS" procedures, is one of the most poorly understood terms in spine surgery.

Most laypeople hearing that phrase will make a number of assumptions. It will often wrongly be assumed upon hearing that a surgery is "minimally invasive" that the incision made will be very small, resulting in an almost imperceptible scar. As a result of aggressive marketing efforts, many have heard of "laser spine surgery" and incorrectly assume that laser surgery is somehow more advanced or a better technique than alternative options. Also, a common misbelief is that all surgery done through a less-invasive approach is better than traditional open surgery.

The above beliefs are sometimes true, but not always, according to Dr. Daveed Frazier, medical director of New York City Spine Surgery PLLC, with offices in Morristown, N.J., and New York City.

"Less invasive does not necessarily correspond with a smaller incision, although sometimes it does," he says. "The term refers to what is being done underneath the skin. The incision could be the same or smaller than traditional open surgery, but what's being done inside the skin is much less disruptive. We're generally not cutting muscle or much of the soft tissue, while using equipment such as microscopes, lasers, tubes and other devices to access the spine through much less disruptive techniques."

Dr. Frazier understands the misunderstanding of minimally invasive surgery, as he is a board member for a number of international minimally invasive spine surgery organizations dedicated to educating and training surgeons in these techniques. In talking to his patients, he knows there will be certain assumptions made that might not always be true and he works to help his patients understand the issues and be educated consumers.

"The phrase 'minimally invasive surgery' has become almost a buzzword in the last several years, but in my

experience, many spine surgeons don't really do minimally invasive surgery. These procedures take an extensive amount of training, experience and commitment to master these techniques."

When discussing your procedure with a potential surgeon, Dr. Frazier recommends asking the doctor how many of the specific procedure he or she has done and if he or she belongs to societies devoted to the practice.

True minimally invasive surgery procedures can have great advantages over traditional, open surgeries, Dr. Frazier says.

"There is less pain and shorter hospital stays," he says. "Frequently, procedures can be done as an outpatient. In addition, there is less blood loss and a faster recovery to normal. There is less scar tissue and less tissue damage. There is a smaller infection rate and often less overall complications."

But find a doctor who has done a good deal of minimally invasive surgery and is also well-trained in traditional open surgery, Dr. Frazier advises.

"Doctors, similar to other professionals, have a tendency to recommend what they do. If a doctor only performs minimally invasive surgeries, it's more likely that's what he or she will recommend, whether it's the best choice or not, because he or she has no other options to offer," he says. "One requirement for an appropriate minimally invasive procedure should be an outcome that is as good or better than traditional open techniques. Therefore, one key question you should ask is what are the surgeon's outcomes like."

At New York City Spine Surgery PLLC, many spine disorders are treated without surgery. However, if surgical intervention becomes necessary, they are masters at open and less invasive surgical techniques. The physicians deliver the most advanced, minimally invasive procedures and treatment options available, including laser spine surgery, minimally invasive spinal fusions in the neck and low back, microscopic and tubular herniated disc surgery, less invasive screw and other hardware placement and many other minimally invasive techniques for numerous spinal disorders.

Dr. Frazier estimates about 80 percent of the surgeries done in his practice would be considered minimally invasive surgeries.