

Minimally invasive techniques are redefining spine surgery

When most people think about having spine surgery, they typically imagine a lengthy and painful procedure. They envision days, possibly weeks spent in the hospital, and an unpleasant recovery. Even more frightening, many worry that the procedure will not have the desired outcome and that they will be left in a worse condition than they were prior to surgery.

Dr. Daveed Frazier, medical director of New York City Spine Surgery PLLC, with offices in Morristown and Manhattan, explains that over the past decade, technological advancements have changed the face of spine surgery. The Harvard-trained, board-certified orthopedic spine surgeon credits minimally invasive spine surgery (MIS), including less invasive fusions, with redefining not just the procedures, but also the recovery.

“Technology has greatly improved over the past 10 to 20 years,” says Dr. Frazier, who spent 11 years training at Harvard, followed by two spine fellowships and a fellowship with the father of orthopaedic surgery, Dr. Maurice Mueller, in Switzerland. “Nothing that I learned in my training — even though I trained with the best people in the world — could have indicated just how much spine surgery would change.”

The surgeon explains that through MIS procedures, he can effectively treat spine disorders with minor disruption of spine anatomy, which is normally associated with traditional, open surgery. As a master in MIS operations, Dr. Frazier performs a substantial number of procedures in outpatient surgery centers throughout the New Jersey-New York area. This allows patients to go home the same day as the surgery and avoids many of the complications and costs associated with in-patient hospitalization.

“What previously could only be done through open surgery now can be accomplished through small incisions, offering patients less pain, reduced blood loss, less scar tissue formation and faster return to normal activity,” he says.

What Conditions Can Be Treated With MIS?

In addition to common ailments such as sciatica, which can be alleviated by a simple microdiscectomy, minimally invasive procedures are used to treat other problems of the spine as well. This includes, but isn't limited to conditions such as spinal stenosis, scoliosis, fractures, tumors, infections, spinal instability or nearly all conditions of the spine.

“Recently, the technology has advanced which gives us the tools to treat more difficult spinal conditions with these much-less-invasive procedures,” Dr. Frazier says. He notes the outcomes associated with MIS procedures are as good, if not better, than those obtained with open surgery.”

The surgeon adds that spinal fusions, in which the bones of the spine are stabilized and mended together, are now being performed less invasively as well. Historically, spinal fusions were considered large operations, with variable results requiring



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Dr. Daveed D. Frazier is medical director of New York City Spine Surgery, PLLC. long recoveries. A lot has changed.

“The difference between minimally invasive fusions and open fusions is night and day,” says Dr. Frazier. “What once was often times considered risky and required extensive recovery can now be performed through small incisions as an outpatient.” These advances are ultimately better for the patient with less complications.

The XLIF, A Minimally Invasive Game Changer

One of the most exciting, less-invasive spinal procedures is the XLIF, which stands for eXtreme Lateral Interbody Fusion. Historically, fusion operations have been bigger procedures, but often required for the long-term solution to many spinal problems. “Patients would frequently come to my office scared and looking for any alternative to a fusion,” Dr. Frazier says. “Yet, my responsibility is to be an advocate for my patients and sometimes fusions are necessary and the best option.”

The spinal column is sitting in the middle of the body. In the past, we had two basic options to approach the spine: from the back or from the front. When coming from the back, you have to go through the large spinal muscles that stabilize the spine. This can be painful and can take a long time to fully heal. If we approach the spine from the front, we have to move structures such as the bowels or major blood vessels of the body. The XLIF takes advantage of an empty space coming from the side of the spine: avoiding the above issues.

“Operating through a small tube, without cutting the muscle, the spine is approached from the side,” Dr. Frazier says. “In conjunction with one of the most advanced nerve-monitoring systems in the world, the XLIF procedure can be done safely, with minimally invasive techniques.”

Dr. Frazier is a master at less invasive fusions done with the XLIF technique. He teaches the procedure to other surgeons at courses around the world. “When indicated, I feel that it is far superior to other surgeries out there, and I can often do this procedure as an outpatient,” he says.

“Most people think their surgeon is the best in the world, but if you look in this area of the country, only 3 (percent) to 5 percent of spine surgeons are performing minimally invasive fusions,” Frazier says. He’s been specializing in MIS procedures during the past decade of his 20 years in practice. “If you are looking for a minimally invasive surgeon, obviously you would like to pick the best person that you can. The more skill and experience a surgeon has, the more likely he’ll be able to offer you the procedure tailored to your condition. It’s also important that the surgeon is comfortable doing open procedures, should the need arise. So do your homework.”