



HEALING AND HOPE

The orthopedic spine specialists at **South Texas Bone & Joint** help patients get back to living happy and productive lives by treating back pain with a conservative focus.

SPECIAL TO INSPIRE COASTAL BEND
Photos by: JENNIFER RECIO PHOTOGRAPHY

ACCORDING TO THE Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, one fourth of all Americans experience back pain at least once in a three-month period. The orthopedic spine specialists at South Texas Bone & Joint (located in the Corpus Christi Medical Center's Charles Clark Building at 601 Texan Trail) want people who suffer from acute and chronic back pain to know there is hope that they can lead happy and productive lives. The key is early diagnosis and effective treatments, whether that includes medication, surgery or other non-surgical methods.

"There's a lot of interest regarding when to see a doctor about a back ailment," says Dr. John P. Masciale, a board-certified orthopedic surgeon specializing in adult spinal surgery at South Texas Bone & Joint. "Many times, all that is needed is rest, heat and over-the-counter medications. But there are instances where the pain is just too intense and handicapping. That's where we come in."

One of the warning signs you might have serious issues with your back is radiculopathy (numbness, tingling, weakness) in your legs or feet. Difficulty controlling the bladder is another serious warning sign of possible trouble. These symptoms should not be ignored, but reported to a primary care or ER physician immediately, before symptoms worsen.

"Here at South Texas Bone & Joint," Masciale adds, "we always try to treat back ailments conservatively, before surgery is considered."

In the appropriate patient with supporting clinical findings, an MRI of the affected area may be warranted. An MRI helps

confirm the underlying basis for sciatic leg pain and radiculopathy of the legs.

"Once a diagnosis has been made, we recommend rest and medication, along with other types of care such as epidural injections for disc herniations that are smaller and contained."

Another question patients might have is whether to treat symptoms with injections or to proceed with surgery. "It's important to remember you might get better without having to undergo surgery," he advises. "As a surgeon, we have a responsibility to the patient to help them decide what the best options for favorable outcomes will be, and that is decided on a case-by-case basis."

Sometimes epidural injections work wonders for a patient, Masciale notes. "It's definitely less risky than surgery, and injections work for the right patient. Patient care is evolving, especially over the last 10 years. If these fail, then surgery can always be offered. Also, insurance companies are increasingly requiring medical evidence that legitimizes what we do for a patient. It's not just a matter of entering a code and getting an authorization for care any more. Insurance companies want evidence that recommended treatments are medically prudent and necessary."

Lower back pain is one of the most common conditions patients complain about. It might start with intense pain in the buttocks area. Over time, it might progress as a deep-seated, burning pain and eventually run the length of the leg associated with altered leg sensation or weakness.

"I see patients, some of whom are in so much pain, they can't perform the most

basic daily activities," Masciale says. "The empathy I have for my patients is the underlying basis for all that I do to help them. It forms the connection in a relationship of trust through which the best outcomes can be reached."

Masciale recalls the story of a young woman who had undergone complex back surgery and was in the intensive care unit for many days. The road to recovery would be long and arduous, but he knew she would recover and resume the active life she had always planned.

"Knowing that I can help patients who feel like there is no hope and who feel they are losing control of their lives ... knowing their intervention is reviving hope again ... it's about the best feeling in the world ... besides being a father and husband."

Dr. John M. Borkowski specializes in adult reconstructive spinal surgery at South Texas Bone & Spine, but he always prefers minimally invasive procedures. "There's less bleeding, quicker recovery times and smaller incisions," Borkowski says. "Shorter hospital stays is an added bonus. Minimally invasive procedures mean less manipulation of the spine, which often results in better outcomes."

Borkowski notes some patients are not good candidates for minimally invasive surgery of the spine, but for the most part, these newer techniques are growing in popularity.

There are ways patients with spine problems can avoid surgery altogether, according to Borkowski. "Weight loss and physical therapy work wonders, especially when patients understand their injury. My goal is to try and heal people without surgery. Each person's spine is individualized, just like a fingerprint."

Technology continues to advance every day, and it is at the point where donating one's own bone from the pelvis is a thing of the past. Today, cells that can perform the same function are grown in a lab or procured from a cadaver donor.

Borkowski says the key to successful patient outcomes is education. He believes in educating his patients from the minute they walk into his office. "I have models in my office that help me explain what their problem is and what their surgery would look like. I try to comfort and reassure them with information. We visit websites together and review information about the latest innovations. Nowadays, patients prefer to be armed with more information versus less."

For patients wanting to avoid surgery, Borkowski warns that medicine alone is not a cure-all. "Long-term dependence on drugs (over-the-counter or prescription) can cause kidney or liver damage. It's helpful for patients to understand getting better might be a year-long process, especially if they want to avoid surgery."

As we age and approach the mid-life stage, small injuries will make chronic conditions flare up and cause more pain, he explains. "The spine itself is largely a mysterious and incompletely understood part of the human body. What may work with a successful outcome for one person may be a failure in another. This is why I stress knowledge for the patient, so they are aware of all the options."



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Learn more about the innovative treatments for chronic back pain at **SOUTH TEXAS BONE & JOINT** by visiting www.southtexasboneandjoint.com or following the group on Facebook and Twitter. Call 361-854-0811 to make an appointment today.