



Getting Back to Life

If back pain is robbing your joy, seek the expert with a discerning approach.

Portland's "Top Spine Doc," neurosurgeon Bret Ball, M.D., Ph.D., of Rose City Spine Surgery, says that around 90% of the population will experience back pain at some point in their lives. "And the other 10% is in denial," he jokes.

All kidding aside, back pain is endemic to the human condition, affecting people of all ages and walks of life. From children to elders, athletes to couch potatoes, the resounding evidence is that no one is immune to the possibility of spinal discomfort.

The good news is that the majority of patients will get better with routine treatments: rest, rehabilitation, chiropractic, or over-the-counter pain medication.

"We always recommend the least invasive options first and make a concerted effort to treat patients without surgery when feasible," says Dr. Ball, who collaborates with a patient's

providers in primary care, pain management, physiatry, chiropractic, or physical therapy to exhaust noninvasive treatments before considering surgery.

Prevention and Education

Preventative measures, too, can be effective in reducing or delaying back problems. Lifestyle habits like regular exercise, proper posture mechanics, and quality sleep go a long way in protecting back health. "Walking is the best exercise for the back. I recommend at least half an hour of walking every day," Dr. Ball says.

In addition to treating spinal degeneration, trauma, deformities, and tumors, Dr. Ball is also a powerful advocate for those injured in workplace or motor vehicle accidents. He understands that the repercussions of such scenarios often include legal and social hurdles, and he

helps patients navigate those minutiae on their path back to wellness.

Whether injuries have resulted from a traumatic incident or are merely the result of life's wears and tears, education plays an enormous role in determining the best course for each situation, and patients at Rose City Spine Surgery are encouraged to be active participants in the decision-making process. Thorough communication and mutual understanding of the risks and benefits are essential components in reaching good outcomes.

"We recommend surgery only when your symptoms are disruptive to your quality of life and when we determine there is a specific anatomic lesion that can be corrected," says Dr. Ball. "I can tell you if there is a specific injury that can be fixed with surgery, but only you can determine whether your pain is severe enough to risk surgery."

GRATEFUL PATIENTS

"Six weeks today since my surgery. I feel wonderful. I am walking three miles every day. Thank you so much!"—**M.A.**

"You have totally changed my life for the best. I can do so much more since your help."—**T.R.**

"Thank you for using your great skill as a surgeon to perform the operation on my back. There's hardly a scratch to show for it. Thanks also for your patience and kindness and, above all, your sense of humor."—**M.S.**

State-of-the-Art Surgery

When surgery is deemed necessary, patients can be confident in choosing the sound judgment and expertise of Rose City Spine Surgery, which offers a full range of leading-edge interventions that can accommodate various patient needs.

Minimally invasive techniques, for example, use small incisions that reduce disruption to healthy tissue and result in faster recoveries and less postoperative pain.

Motion-preservation techniques protect a patient's mobility. "The traditional treatment for cervical spine issues has been fusion, but that's become a dirty word for some patients. It can reduce mobility in the spine and may lead to additional surgery down the road as it can place stress on the other unfused parts of the spine," Dr. Ball explains. Instead of fusion, Dr. Ball employs artificial disks and joint-preservation techniques when possible, which generally produce better outcomes and after which patients are less likely to require future surgery.

Another area of advancement relates to sacroiliac joint dysfunction, a common condition that accounts for as much as 15% to 30% of all back pain. "For a long time, there wasn't much we could do about it. Patients just had to live with it," he says. "But we now have a minimally invasive procedure requiring just a 1-inch incision that can improve pain in up to 90% of eligible patients."

Neurosurgery: a Calling

Dr. Ball didn't always dream of becoming a neurosurgeon. While other medical students knew in their first year which specialty they wanted to pursue, Dr. Ball kept his options open. It was during his third year, during a clinical rotation in surgery, that his destiny became clear. "Surgery was something that spoke to me. I felt like that's where I needed to be," he says.

Dr. Ball further specialized in neurosurgery, relishing the intellectual challenge of working

with patients who have particularly disruptive conditions. He completed residency training at Mayo Clinic, which was the No. 1 neurosurgery program in the country, and also completed a year of advanced fellowship training in complex and minimally invasive spine surgery.

In harmony with technical training, Dr. Ball believes in "the science of compassion," particularly in a field where patients come to him in significant pain. "Most patients have already tried everything they can think of to get better, and they're still hurting. It's important to

meet them on their level and try to understand what's really going on. It has to be a cooperative experience, where a patient can tell you not just what their pain is but how it's impacting their life. Then we can identify the best way to help them, surgery or otherwise.

"Having spine surgery can be a life-changing event, for better or for worse," he concludes. "Empowering patients to make informed decisions and helping them navigate through these difficult situations is the most fulfilling aspect of my work."



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