

Awake Spinal Fusion changes the way physicians approach back surgery

Surgery always carries risks, especially when it means undergoing general anesthesia. However, a procedure known as Awake Spinal Fusion is changing that. Used to treat spinal issues such as lower lumbar fusion, spinal stenosis and herniated discs, the minimally invasive procedure can decrease recovery time, get patients home faster and doesn't require narcotic medications to use as pain killers following the procedure.

Dr. Alok Sharon, MHCDS, orthopedic spine surgeon with NJ Spine and Wellness, spoke with NJ Advance Media about the procedure and how it is making the decision to undergo surgery to treat back injuries easier.

Q: What is Awake Spinal Fusion?

A: Awake Spinal Fusion doesn't require general anesthesia instead we rely on highly-effective regional anesthesia and numb the patient in a unique way. It is a minimally invasive procedure done while the patient is awake.

In addition, because the incision is so small, the patient heals faster and more effectively.

Awake surgery has been done in one form or another for some time for other procedures, but a full adaption for spine surgery hasn't been common.

It's a pretty difficult surgery, and now, the ability to do it for spinal fusion is making the difference. Traditionally, spinal fusion surgery across the country is done with big, open incisions, and the recovery is harder because of the pain felt post-op.

Q: How is Awake Spinal Fusion more effective than traditional procedures?

A: General anesthesia can lead to cardiac problems, especially for elderly individuals and those who have a breathing problem, such as COPD. General anesthesia also tends to be stronger and can have a greater affect on the brain of an elderly patient than it does on an individual who is younger. After the age of 65, individuals can experience a higher rate of delirium when they undergo general anesthesia.

Additionally, since there is less pain following the procedure, patients no longer need to take opioids during the recovery process. Many individuals will not undergo treatment because they are afraid of becoming addicted to opioids during their recovery.

This is definitely a breakthrough. What we've done is take a surgery that many people were

afraid to have because of the risks, and minimized those risks.

Q: How long can a patient expect to be in the hospital following the procedure?

A: Anywhere between 50% and 90% of patients can go home the same day.

Since we don't use general anesthesia, patients are on their feet faster. And since it is minimally invasive, patients are home sooner and they recover quicker.

In general, our length of stay is a bit more than a day, versus across the country where most people who have lumbar fusion procedures stay in the hospital three or four days.

Q: Who is a good candidate for the procedure?

A: Individuals who have pain that goes from the back down to the leg, sciatica, or someone who has been through physical therapy or tried injections in the back and who may want surgery with minimal disruption. Situations such as spinal stenosis and herniated discs are the two most common conditions that would benefit from awake spine surgery. If an individual has any back

pain, he or she should see if they qualify.

However, many individuals with back pain don't require surgery, and NJ Spine and Wellness, can provide these patients with comprehensive care. We can take care of all your needs, surgical and nonsurgical, and get you better faster.

To schedule an appointment, call (877) 333-6579 or visit njspineandwellness.com. NJ Spine and Wellness has locations in East Brunswick, Old Bridge, Freehold and Matawan.

Alok Sharon, MD, MHCDS,
*orthopedic spine surgeon,
NJ Spine and Wellness*