What is Failed Back Surgery Syndrome?

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Question: What is Failed Back Surgery Syndrome?

In back surgery, doctors work with the aim of reducing a patient’s pain by changing the spine's anatomy, especially at the lesion site. Because of this, there is no definitive guarantee that back surgery will remove back pain.

Answer: When back surgery fails to remove the pain, the result is a condition known as failed back surgery syndrome, or FBSS.

The incidence of FBSS ranges between 5 and 50%, according to a study done in 2005 in Prague, Czech Republic. The author of the study attributes the high percentage of FBSS cases in part to the rise in number of surgeries performed. 1

Failed back surgery syndrome can be due to a number of factors that doctors and researchers are still discussing. These include:

• Scar tissue that forms around the surgery site, interrupting normal neurological functioning.
• The technicalities of the operation are not successful, the performing surgeon had poor technique, and/or there is iatrogenic injury present.
• The surgery is not performed at the site that causes the pain.
• The surgery performed is not actually necessary.
• The patient is a poor fit for a successful surgery.
• The diagnosis was incorrect.
• Complications of surgery arise.
Most patients with FBSS have accompanying psychological, social and/or vocational problems indirectly related to the pain. It’s important that these issues be carefully sorted out before any decision to go back for more surgery is made, as they can cloud the evaluation of next steps to be taken.

Treatment options for FBSS are dependent upon:

- Thorough assessment using MRI, CT or other appropriate imaging techniques.
- Consideration of the patient’s concurring health problems and extenuating life circumstances.
- Medical history.
- Physical examination.

Generally, treatment focuses on conservative measures first, such as rehabilitation and pain management, before another surgery is considered. The conservative measures may include exercise, manual therapy, spinal cord stimulators and/or an implanted pump to deliver pain medication. Sometimes further surgery is not a consideration in the patient’s pain management future.

Bibliography

Suggested Reading
- Pain Medicine
- Lesion
- Back Surgery

Related - Failed Back Surgery Syndrome - FBSS
- Inflammation and Scar Tissue Formation
- Diagnostic Imaging
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FBSS - Spinal Fusion
- Spinal Fusion for Chronic Low Back Pain?
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