

Spine Surgery is Safe

Spinal problems assume importance since they are quite common. Back pain is the second most common health problem with only the common cold affecting people more often. A look at a person paralysed below the neck and confined to the wheelchair for life after a spinal injury in a road traffic accident would give an idea of how devastating the consequences of spinal problems can be. There can be very serious economic consequences too. Back pain, for example, is responsible for the largest number of man hours lost in the industry in US. It is thus very important that we have a good knowledge about how to properly manage spinal problems.

Unfortunately there are many myths prevailing in the Indian society related to management of spinal problems. One of the most common ones is *“Don’t get a surgery done for your spinal problem. It will leave you paralysed for life.”*

Association of Spine Surgeons of India (ASSI) want the community to know that not only is there no rationale behind this myth, getting misled by it can have serious consequences. Spine Surgery is safe. The incidence of complications as per evidence base proves that the myths prevalent in this regard are not justified. The incidence of increase in permanent neurological deficit (weakness in the muscles), for example, is less than 1% after routine spine surgeries. The complication rate of routine spine surgery is no more than that of other surgeries like abdominal/cardiac/orthopaedic surgeries.

In fact, it is well established that when a spine surgery is indicated, not undergoing it would have a far higher incidence of the complications which the common man dreads from a spine surgery due to the myths prevalent in the Indian Society. However the Association would also want to point out that except when red flags (progressive paralysis, difficulty in bowel/bladder control) are present, spine surgery is required only when a good conservative program fails. In fact the vast majority of spinal problems can be managed conservatively.

With advances in technology, the outcomes of spine surgery have improved remarkably with time. Improved knowledge about spine and its problems and advances in preoperative planning, technique of surgery, instrumentation, anaesthetic techniques, intra-operative imaging and antibiotic policy as well as intra-operative spinal cord monitoring, blood auto-transfusion and navigation where required, have made spine surgery a lot more safe with acceptable complication rates.

Some very severe spine problems requiring very complex spine surgeries may have higher complication rate than the routine spine surgeries. However it would not be proper to have a general conception of the safety of spine surgeries on the basis of any complications arising from such complex surgeries. Such severe spine problems are quite uncommon. Moreover the consequences of not managing them would be far more devastating.

ASSI however would want to caution that while the majority of spine surgeries are very safe to perform, the results can be compromised / disastrous in hands of untrained or unqualified surgeons.

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