

UNDERSTANDING YOUR BACK OR NECK SYMPTOMS: WHEN YOU CAN USE WATCHFUL WAITING & WHEN YOU CANNOT

NOTE: A person may use "watchful waiting" for a few days for symptoms of muscle strain or even radiating pain into an arm or leg.

+ However, ANY WEAKNESS OR NUMBNESS in an arm or leg, or loss of control of bowel or bladder, are emergency symptoms. You need to see a spine specialist promptly (as noted below) to prevent the symptoms from becoming permanent.

PAIN LIMITED TO THE NECK:

Neck pain can be caused by traumatic injury, like whiplash from a car accident, or muscle or ligament strain. See our Home Remedies section on our Internet site. If pain persists beyond a week, you should see a spine specialist to determine the underlying cause.

+ FEVER, DROWSINESS, SEVERE HEADACHE, NAUSEA, VOMITING, UNUSUAL SENSITIVITY TO LIGHT?

Other symptoms may be unrelated to a back or neck problem, like cervical meningitis. This can be serious. You should consult a physician immediately for any of the above symptoms.

RADIATING PAIN IN THE ARM:

Pain that radiates into an arm below the elbow can imply a herniated disc in the neck. Many times, radiating pain can be treated non-surgically. Radiating pain should be seen by a spine specialist within 2 weeks.

+ LOSS OF BOWEL OR BLADDER CONTROL:

This is a SERIOUS emergency symptom (cauda equina) that needs to be treated immediately by a spine surgeon within 24 hours. If you experience these symptoms at night or on the weekend, go to the emergency room. If not treated quickly, the person may lose control over their bowel and bladder permanently.

+ NUMBNESS OR WEAKNESS IN ARM OR HAND:

Numbness or weakness in the arm or hand is a more serious disc-related symptom that is NOT appropriate for watchful waiting. Left untreated, the symptom can become permanent. You should see a spine specialist within 3 days.

RADIATING PAIN INTO THE LEG:

Pain that radiates into a leg below the knee can imply a herniated disc in the low back. But many times radiating pain can be treated non-surgically. Radiating pain should be seen by a spine specialist within 2 weeks.

+ NUMBNESS OR WEAKNESS IN LEG OR FOOT:

Numbness or weakness in the leg or foot is a SERIOUS disc-related symptom that is NOT appropriate for watchful waiting. Left untreated, the symptom can become permanent. You should see a spine specialist within 3 days.

+ TRAUMA / FALL/ACCIDENT:

Any time you fall, are in a car accident, or could have fractured a bone in your back, you should see a spine specialist immediately!

PAIN LIMITED TO THE LOW BACK:

Pain that is limited to the low back may be the result of muscle strain. While pain spasms can be excruciating, muscle strain problems do not require surgery. See our Home Remedies section on our Internet site for special stretches that can relieve pain, and the proper use of anti-inflammatories. While less common, a kidney infection or kidney stone may also cause low back pain symptoms. Consequently, you should consult a spine specialist accordingly for symptoms that persist beyond 5 days to determine the cause of your symptoms and the best treatment options, including a customized home exercise program that will make the back stronger, more flexible and resistant to future strain.

+ FOOT DROP / WEAKNESS IN FOOT:

If pain, weakness or numbness extends into the foot so that you are unable to lift your toe as you walk, that is called Foot Drop, which is an emergency disc-related symptom. You need a spine specialist within 48 hours. If not treated promptly, it could lead to permanent weakness in the foot.