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BENEFITS OF SPINAL SURGERY DISAPPEAR AFTER 6 MONTHS

Physical Therapy offers same outcomes for patients with sciatica 6 months after surgery.

Tallahassee, Florida, June 23, 2008 – A recent study published in the British Medical Journal¹ reports that spinal surgery for patients with sciatica offers a short term benefit, but by 6 months that benefit disappears and no difference is seen between patients who had surgery and those receiving physical therapy. The study suggests that the benefits of surgery are only short-term and conservative treatments such as physical therapy may offer the same outcome.

Sciatica often resolves quickly, but in some patients it persists. Previous to this study, only limited evidence existed that could guide patients about when or if that resolution was going to occur. In this study, patients had the option of opting for early surgery, or prolonged conservative management under the guidance of a physical therapist. The surgical group showed improvement in symptoms for only a brief period following surgery. But, by 6 months, and up to 2 years following surgery, the difference between the groups having surgery and those that didn't disappeared.

"The significance of this study is that patients may be able to avoid surgery if they realized they can expect a similar improvement in symptoms if they use other ways to manage the pain for 6 months," said Dr. Timothy Flynn of Regis University in Denver, CO, and President of the American Academy of Orthopedic Manual Physical Therapists (AAOMPT). "Patients should be aware that surgery is not the only option to reduce the symptoms of sciatica."

The study's authors conclude that since the early benefits of surgery are gone by 6 months, when deciding to have surgery for sciatica, well informed patients, and not physicians, should decide if and when they opt for surgery.

The results of this study, coupled with the findings of another study published earlier this year suggest expensive treatments for low back pain may not be the best approach. Less expensive conservative options like physical therapy may be the preferred choice for patients with low back pain.

"The best course of treatment for low back pain is to make sure it is addressed early and does not progress to leg pain, or become a chronic condition," continued Flynn. "Research has shown that early movement and treatments like exercise and spinal manipulation offer strong benefits to this group of patients."

These treatments include hands-on physical therapy to mobilize the spine and exercises designed to alleviate low back pain. Flynn suggests that patients seek out physical therapists as a first-line treatment for these conditions.

For more on the benefits physical therapists can provide in the management of back and neck problems, contact your nearest physical therapist or visit the American Academy of Orthopaedic Manual Physical Therapists website at www.aaompt.org. AAOMPT represents physical therapists by promoting excellence in orthopaedic manual physical therapy practice, education and research.

¹Peul WC, et al. *BMJ*. 2008; 336(7657):1355-8.