

Spinal Fusions: When Are They Necessary

Matching a serious surgery to the right problem

Dr. Christopher Gay, MD, eMBA | Interventional Pain Specialist | The Nervous Breakdown

Spinal fusion is one of the most effective operations in medicine for the right patient, and one of the most overused for the wrong one.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Fusion works best for real mechanical instability: slippage, fracture, deformity, or a failed prior surgery.
- It tends to work poorly for nonspecific pain without instability.
- A second, independent opinion helps confirm fusion is the right tool for your specific spine.

THE FULL PICTURE

Fusion is not a small procedure. It permanently joins two or more vertebrae, trading motion at that segment for stability. It tends to work best when there is a mechanical instability problem: a vertebra slipping forward on the one below it (spondylolisthesis), a spine destabilized by fracture or tumor, a significant structural deformity like severe scoliosis, or a spine that has failed a prior surgery and is now unstable.

Fusion tends to work poorly for nonspecific chronic low back pain without instability, for pain driven primarily by diffuse disc degeneration without a clear structural culprit, and for pain that has a significant central sensitization component. Operating on a segment that is not actually unstable can leave the original pain in place while adding surgical risks and stress on the segments above and below the fusion.

Before agreeing to a fusion, it is reasonable to ask what specific instability or structural finding is being corrected, what non-surgical options have been tried, and what happens if surgery does not resolve the pain.

A second opinion from a spine specialist and a pain medicine physician working independently, rather than in sequence from the same referral, is one of the best ways to confirm fusion is the right tool for your specific spine.

This handout is for general patient education and does not replace individualized medical advice. Discuss your specific diagnosis and treatment options with your physician.

The Nervous Breakdown • www.thenervousbreakdown.org • Alaska Center for Pain Relief