

Intro: It's one of the most commonly performed back surgeries in the United States, but a new study shows patients with herniated discs may be able to heal just as well without surgery as those who do go the under the knife. New York One's Health and Fitness reporter, Kafi Drexel, has more on the findings published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Kafi Drexel: According to most doctors, almost all of us will experience back pain at some point in our lives and pain from suffering a herniated disc is among the most common.

Dr. Tindel: 20% of the population under the age of 60, who don't even have back pain or back problems have a herniated disc, and they don't even know they have a herniated disc.

Kafi Drexel: A herniated disc occurs when two bones in the spine press on nerves around the back bone and can result from disc material that wears down naturally as we age, or a single strain or injury. That was the case for Benjamin Gelfand who injured himself working out 5 years ago.

Benjamin Gelfand: My initial inclination would be, just going to bed, be asleep as long as I can be as unconscious as I can because the pain was just terrible.

Kafi Drexel: For Some people it can cause intolerable pain in the back and legs known as sciatica and be so severe that many patients often turn to surgery. But Gelfand, a physical therapist, decided not to go that route and to stick with physical therapy instead. And he could be onto something. A new study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association shows surgery may only be slightly more effective than non-surgical options, like physical therapy. In the study of more than a thousand patients across the country, some underwent surgery while others sought treatment without it. Researchers say patients who got surgery were a little happier with their outcome, however, both groups saw their pain decrease and improved function within 3 months, and both groups continued to get better over time.

Dr. Tindel: If you have the option and the luxury of taking a little time off and trying a non-surgical treatment option, then that is a great option for you. What these studies tell us is that it's a safe option and it's certainly one that you should consider strongly.

Kafi Drexel: Tindel says If it's pain a patient absolutely can't bear, then surgery may still be the best option, adding the upside as a patient's pain will go away almost immediately. But it still requires up to 6 weeks of recovery and taking it easy. Without surgery, Gelfand says it took him about the same time to get over his pain.

Benjamin Gelfand: Now how am I doing now five years later, I've done two marathons, couple triathlons and I'm a long-distance cyclist at this point, so I'm doing pretty well. There is still sometimes an underlying back pain, but I know how to manage it now and I know that it can be treated conservatively.

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