Michael Harrison: Ladies and gentleman welcome back. Hour number two underway at this weekend's two-hour installment of a Touch of Grey, the talk show for grown-ups, I'm Michael Harrison anchoring this hour as well, and I'm glad that you have joined us we’ll Do everything we can to continue making this weekend a memorable listening experience for you. Let's kick off this hour with a conversation between Steve and Dr. Nathaniel Tindel he’s the author of “I've Got Your Back: The Truth About Spine Surgery Straight From a Surgeon” published by New American Library. He's one of the country's foremost back surgeons and director of the New York Center for Spinal Disorders.

Steve: You know our society looks for quick solutions, and one of the quick solutions is surgery, but you believe that surgery is probably advised too often, isn't it?

Dr. Tindel: It's the reason why I wrote this book, I find that sometimes in my office, I find that patients come to see me for a second opinion regarding surgery and even though they've already decided to have surgery when I talk to them about how they came to that process and how quickly they came to it, you know it seems that they spend more time trying to figure out which type of computer to buy, than whether or not to have spine surgery and of course the ramifications of spinal surgery are much more profound and I often spend a lot of time talking to my patients about whether or not spine surgery is worth having.

Steve: Well you know what let's look at it well, surgery in general and specific spine surgery, surgery in general is not necessarily a walk in the park or a roll on the gurney, there are risks always inherent in surgery aren't there?

Dr. Tindel: That's right, but you know, people when it comes to surgery, people are used to what I call the appendicitis model, you know you go to the hospital your stomach isn't feeling well and the doctor sees you, they diagnose you with an appendicitis, your appendix ready to burst, they take you to the operating room, they take the appendix out, and you walk out of the hospital 24 to 48 hours later feeling better, and you never look back. And unfortunately, that model does not hold for a lot of different types of surgery and I would tell you that spine surgery is really one of those areas where a lot of times it doesn't work out as well as people thought it might. I should also add that there's a time and place for spine surgery, spine surgery works very well for certain problems, but there are other areas where spine surgery isn't as satisfying.

Steve: Spinal fusion is probably the most common back surgery now isn't it?

Dr. Tindel: It is, in 2004, and that's the latest year that we have hard statistics for, there were over 300,000 spinal fusions done in the United States alone.

Steve: Is this something that is part of the business of medicine, is this something that the insurance companies prefer or why so many?

Dr. Tindel: Well I don't think the truth companies prefer spinal fusion. Spinal fusion is a rather costly procedure and I should also tell you that there's also a very good time and place for spinal fusion, if child has scoliosis and we need to correct that curvature of the back, and that's what scoliosis is, then spinal fusion is the treatment of choice. Not doing spinal fusion would actually be a bad idea for the child. Again, if you're riding your motorcycle and going a hundred miles an hour and you happen to hit a pothole, we live in New York's we have a lot of potholes, and you get thrown off your bike and break your back, and its unstable, the bones aren't connected anymore. Spinal fusion is what you're going to want to have done, but if you just have back pain and there's no identifiable cause for that problem then thinking that spinal fusion is going to cure your back pain is a dicey bet at best.

Steve: So, for those people there are alternative therapies that may be less invasive, certainly less costly, and might be just as effective right?

Dr. Tindel: There are, you know as a spinal surgeon patient comes to me with all different types of back problems, some of them are quite serious. The one thing that amazes me though, is how many of them have not tried or been educated about some of the more conservative and alternative treatments that you're referring to and so they never even had an option to try them because they just don't know.

Steve: Well let's talk about some of them, what are some of the things that people can do, all of us, for better back health?

Dr. Tindel: Well I think that there's some basic lifestyle changes, and I spend a lot of time with my patients and it’s amazing how some simple little things can make a big difference. For example; stress, you know, back pain isn't just about your back, it's also about your head. And stress and pain don't mix well. You know, I'm often asked whether stress can cause back problems, and I would tell you that the answer is we don't know, but we do know that stress can make any kind of pain worse. So, working on stress, reducing stress, is an important part of anybody’s lifestyle change. Weight loss is another one, and smoking is another one that most people don’t even think about.

Steve: Smoking, really? And that can affect your back?

Dr. Tindel: Yeah, I'm sure you could think of a hundred different reasons to stop smoking.

Steve: Absolutely.

Dr. Tindel: And there's one more; smoke and the contents of smoke actually attack and degrade the disc, and specifically the lumbar disc, and can lead to premature degeneration and associated back pain. So, smokers have a higher incidence of disc problems and back pain associated with those problems.

Steve: I know a lot of people who get up in the morning with lower back pain is that most likely, and it goes away, but is that something that relates to their mattress and if so, how do you know when you should get a new mattress, and what kind?

Dr. Tindel: Well you know, you've raised two issues one; sleep, and two; mattresses. Let me start with mattresses first. I often find patients go out and spend several thousand dollars for a very expensive mattress that they see an advertisement for and often times they're quite disappointing, disappointed when they finally get to use the mattress. So, you know I recommend that just because a mattress is a lot of money, or because they do a lot of advertising doesn't necessarily mean it's best for you. I think a good thing to do, is to go to the mattress store in the early evening when you're tired, and try out the mattress. Lie on it for a few minutes, close your eyes, see how it feels. I also recommend that a supportive mattress but not necessarily a firm mattress is usually better, but you know, no one mattress fits everybody. And mattresses, one mattress that’s good for you wouldn't be good for somebody else. The other issue that you touched upon was sleep. We know that a bad night sleep can make for a rough day even under the best of circumstances and when your back hurts, sleep deprivation or not having a good night's sleep, can only make it worse. So, getting a better night sleep is hard but it's certainly worth the effort and there are a lot of things people can do to do that.

Steve: One of the things that surprised me in your book was that you suggest people use chiropractors and that's something that's always made me concerned and fearful but you think it's a time and place for them as well?

Dr. Tindel: I do. You know, I’m one orthopedic surgeon thinks chiropractors are great and I'm not alone, 10% of the United States population visits the chiropractor every year so something must be working. Recently, there's been some very good medical evidence that shows that chiropractors do help, they work specifically for more acute episodes of back pain and they’re just as effective as almost any other treatment and certainly a lot better than doing nothing at all.

Steve: Interesting. One other thing though, that surprised me, and I was glad to read because now I’ll learn from it, has to do with people who have back problems you may see them wearing these braces or corsets or other kind of supports and you think they're not getting any support?

Dr. Tindel: They're not, and again I'm not alone in that. There's been some very rigorous medical studies that have come out in the last year or two that show that braces actually don't work. In fact, they can be quite dangerous in our population, as we get older we’re dealing with issues like osteoporosis and as the disc degenerates, disc degeneration which is where the disc gets narrowed and loses its water, and basically what a brace does is it supports your spine and although it might feel better when you put that brace on, what you're really doing is your shielding your back from stress. And although at the beginning of this discussion it sounds like that's what you want to do, but it really turns out that's not what you want to do. You want your bones and your discs to see stress, we know that the more exercise, the more movement, the more people get out there and get going, the better people do. So, reducing activity like putting on a brace or sitting in a chair for the whole day is about the worst thing you can do. Braces can cause more damage in the end than the small benefit you get at the beginning.

Announcer: That’s Dr. Nathaniel Tindel and he is in conversation with our own Steve Weisman. He is the author of “I’ve got your back: the truth about spine surgery, straight from spine surgeon” published by New American Library.