

WHAT YOUR SYMPTOMS INDICATE

Many back problems can improve on their own or with non-surgical treatment. The key is to understand what various symptoms mean and which symptoms are emergencies and need to be seen immediately by a spine specialist.

PAIN IN THE ARM - When pain radiates into the arm, the problem is serious and should be seen by a spine specialist within 48 hours. Pain that shoots into the arm below the elbow can imply a herniated disc in the neck. This may include weakness, tingling or numbness in the hand. As a rule of thumb, the further down the arm that the pain radiates, the more serious the problem.

+ DO YOU HAVE ANY OF THESE SYMPTOMS: FEVER, DROWSINESS, SEVERE HEADACHE, NAUSEA OR VOMITING, SENSITIVITY TO LIGHT? Go to the emergency room or make a same-day appointment with a spine doctor.

PAIN INTO THE LEG - When pain shoots down into the leg, the problem is more serious and should be seen by a spine specialist within 48 hours. Pain that shoots into the leg can be an indication of a herniated disc in the lumbar spine. As a rule of thumb, the further down the leg that the pain radiates, the more serious the condition.

NECK PAIN - Pain in the neck can be caused by traumatic injury, like whiplash from a car accident, or more simply from muscle or ligament strain.

+ LOSS OF BOWEL OR BLADDER CONTROL - This symptom 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 seen immediately, the person may lose control over their bowel and bladder permanently.

LOWER BACK PAIN - Pain exclusively in the lower back can often be a result of muscle strain. While pain spasms can be excruciating, you may not need surgery. The best treatment for this pain is usually rehab and therapy. Cases of lower back pain that persist for months are a different story. This is called "axial low back pain." These cases are more difficult to treat.

BELOW THE KNEE - When pain radiates below the knee, it is important to see a spine specialist within 48 hours so that the pain does not become permanent.

+ FOOT DROP - If pain, weakness or numbness extends into the foot so that you are unable to lift it, see a spine specialist within 24 hours. If not treated immediately, it can lead to permanent weakness in the leg.

