

SACRAL ILIAC JOINT DYSFUNCTION

IF YOU HAVE LOW BACK PAIN, you are not alone. Up to 85% of all people do at some point in their lives. It is also possible that up to 30% of all chronic low back pain is due to sacroiliac (SI) dysfunction. The sacroiliac joints are located in the pelvis where the iliac bone joins the sacrum. The SI joint helps to stabilize your pelvis and bear the weight of your upper body. If it degenerates or becomes injured, the nerve endings in the SI joint can cause pain in your low back, pelvis, buttocks and legs.

What Does It Hurt? Common Causes

A number of factors can cause SI joint dysfunction, or put you at greater risk for developing it. For instance, women may be a greater risk due to anatomical differences that seem to make them somewhat more vulnerable than men. Other risk factors include:

- Injury – Accidents, falls and missteps, even minor ones, are major causes of SI problems. Improper lifting can also cause injury.
- Anatomy – Anatomic variations such as uneven leg length, abnormal gait and scoliosis can stress the SI joint and make it prone to injury.
- Pregnancy – During pregnancy the ligaments that hold the SI joints in place stretch to allow for delivery. If they remain loose after pregnancy, the SI joints can shift and move excessively, causing pain.
- Previous lumbar surgery – Lumbar fusion changes the way the spine moves and absorbs shock. Sometimes this results in a transfer of shock, and greater stress on the SI joints.

The SI joints connect the lowest part of the spine above the tailbone with the iliac bones of the pelvis. Because of its pivotal location, a damaged SI joint can make the simplest activities painful.

A Pain with a Past

The sacroiliac joint has been recognized as a cause of back pain for decades. In fact, in the early 20th century virtually all back pain was attributed to the SI joint. If surgery was performed, it was done on the SI joint. Unfortunately without the advanced diagnostic and surgical techniques we have today, many patients

emerged from their treatment worse off than they were in the first place.

Then in the 1930's, research pointed to disc problems as a major cause of back pain and the tide turned. Suddenly disc procedures were the treatment of choice and treating the SI joint became something of the past.

Now, today there is new awareness of the role of the SI joint in back pain. Doctors now realize that SI joint problems can easily be mistaken for issues of the lumbar disc or low back. Now many physicians are trained to consider SI joint function in their diagnostic process and how to differentiate between the various sources of low back pain with provocative tests.

Symptoms of SI Joint Problems

Some of the most common symptoms of SI joint dysfunction include:

- Pain in the buttocks – Usually you feel this as a dull ache on one side of your low back that may extend into your thigh.
- Pain with daily activities – Even simple activities like walking up and down stairs, climbing hills and vacuuming can make your pelvis twist and cause you pain.
- Difficulty sitting or lying down – You may feel pain on one side while sitting or lying down that makes you want to shift your weight to the other side.

Back Pain Is a Complex Condition

Because back pain is a complex condition with many possible causes, doctors use a methodical process to determine a diagnosis.

The process usually begins with a thorough examination and discussion about the pain, specifically exactly where it is located, severity, what triggers the pain and history of injury. Part of your workup may include xrays, a CT scan or MRI.

Provocative tests are one of the best tools for diagnosing SI joint dysfunction. For these tests, the doctor applies pressure to the painful areas and performs up to give specific maneuvers that reproduce the pain you have been feeling.

You may also have had a test where the doctor put a local anesthetic in your SI joint using a fluoroscopically guided injection. If the injection gave you significant relief, it is a strong indicator that the SI joint is the culprit, or at least a major contributor.

Conservative Treatment First

With SI joint dysfunction, as with many conditions, it is smart to begin with the most conservative treatments. You may have tried physical therapy, chiropractic adjustments and oral medications. Some people feel better with a pelvic belt, or injection therapy. But if you have an SI joint dysfunction diagnosis, you've exhausted all the conservative options, and you still have not found relief, surgery can be your best next step.

Choosing Surgery

Your doctor recommends surgery for you when you don't want to live with SI joint pain, conservative treatments have failed to help and your doctor feels you could benefit from surgery.

Minimally invasive SI joint fusion surgery can return you to the active life you want to enjoy.

This type of surgery starts with two small incisions in the side of your buttock, about 2 centimeters in length. Your surgeon will place implants in the SI joint to stabilize the joint as the bone heals in place. Your doctor will decide how long you should stay in the hospital, but most patients can go home after one or two days. □

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