

Patient guide to
spondylolisthesis

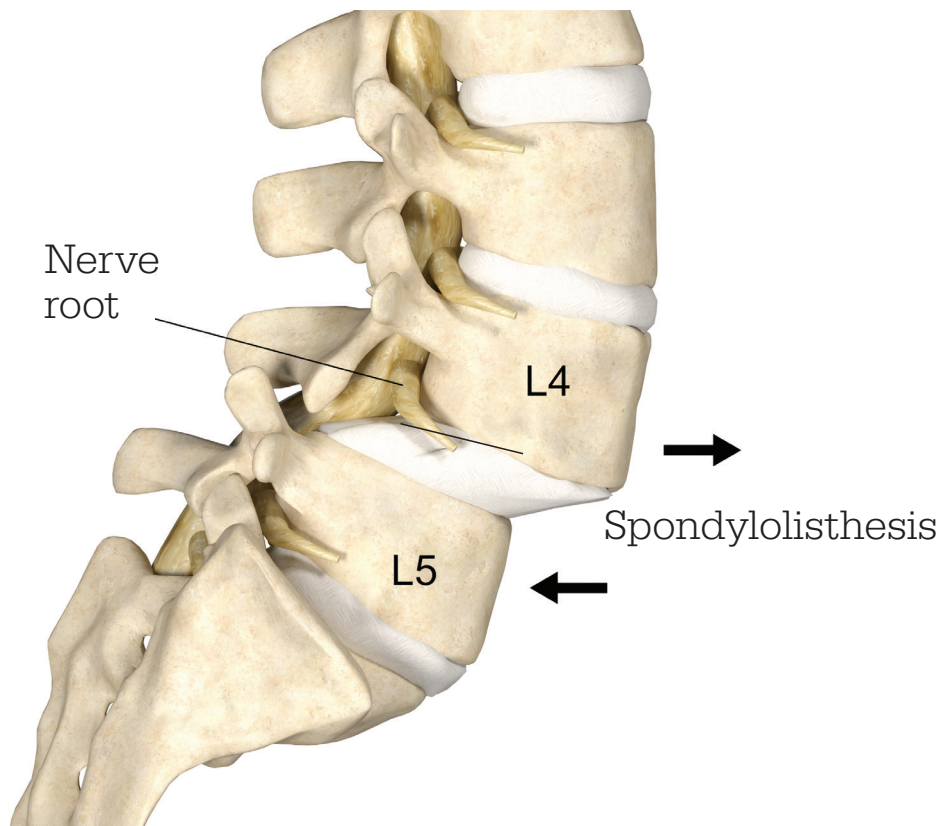


Table of contents

What is spondylolisthesis?	3
What are some of the possible risk factors for spondylolisthesis?	4
What are some common symptoms of spondylolisthesis?	5
What are some non-surgical treatment options?	5
Surgical treatment options	6
Glossary	7

What is spondylolisthesis?

Spondylolisthesis is defined as a slippage of one spinal bone (vertebra) relative to an adjacent vertebra. Usually, one vertebra shifts forward relative to the vertebra immediately below it. Although there are many risk factors for spondylolisthesis in adults, degenerative disc disease is among the most common. It may also be caused by a malformation of a vertebra that is present since birth (congenital deformity), repetitive stress on the bone due to certain activities, or sudden injury (acute trauma) in adults or adolescents. Back pain may accompany this condition, and if the slip results in pressure on (compression of) the nerves, leg symptoms can also develop.



L4-L5 Spondylolisthesis

What are some of the possible risk factors for spondylolisthesis?

- Degenerative disc disease (more common in adults than adolescents)
- A fracture of a portion of the rear part of the vertebra (lamina) due to repetitive stress; this is called a pars defect
- A malformation of a vertebra that is present from birth (congenital deformity)
- Sudden injury (acute trauma)



What are some common symptoms of spondylolisthesis?

- Lower back pain
- Pain in one or both legs
- Numbness, tingling, or weakness in one or both legs
- Sway back posture (unbalanced way of standing characterized by a forward hip thrust and slouched upper back)
- Rarely, loss of bowel or bladder control



What are some non-surgical treatment options?

Anti-inflammatory and/or pain medications, bracing, limitation of activities such as sports, and/or physical therapy may be used to treat symptoms of spondylolisthesis. Occasionally, spinal epidural injections are utilized for pain relief. Surgery may be considered for patients whose symptoms do not improve, but usually only if they have associated neurological symptoms or deformity of the spine.



Surgical treatment options for **spondylolisthesis**

In general, surgical treatment options presented by your surgeon are aimed at relieving pressure on nerve roots in an attempt to address pain.

Spinal decompression (i.e., laminectomy, laminotomy, and/or foraminotomy)

A spinal decompression involves fully or partially removing the bone and soft tissues that cover and surround the nerves, including **bone spurs** (see Glossary), to enlarge the space for and relieve pressure on (compression of) the nerve roots or **thecal sac** (see Glossary).



Incision: lower back (posterior lumbar)

Decompression and posterior spinal fusion

In addition to a decompression, your surgeon may perform a **spinal fusion** (see Glossary) to stabilize the back (posterior) portion of some of the spinal bones (vertebrae). A fusion procedure usually includes the placement of stabilization devices such as metal screws and rods to help hold the vertebrae together. Your surgeon will also place **natural** or synthetic **bone material** (see Glossary) to assist in the healing process.*



Incision: lower back (posterior lumbar)

Interbody fusion procedures

In addition to a decompression and/or posterior **spinal fusion** (see Glossary), your surgeon may choose to perform a fusion in the space at the front of the spinal column in between the spinal bones (vertebrae) called the **interbody space** (see Glossary). In these procedures, which can be done from a front (anterior), side (lateral) or back (posterior) approach to the spine, and as explained in additional detail below, your surgeon will remove the degenerated disc material and replace it with either a piece of **donor bone** (see Glossary) or an implant made of metal or plastic and filled with **natural bone material** (see Glossary).*

- **Posterior or Transforaminal Lumbar Interbody Fusion (PLIF or TLIF)**

In a PLIF or TLIF, your surgeon will access the disc space using the same incision he/she used for the decompression and/or posterior **spinal fusion** (see Glossary).



Incision: lower back (posterior lumbar)

- **Anterior Lumbar Interbody Fusion (ALIF)**

In an ALIF, your surgeon will make an incision on the front of your abdomen. He/she will then safely move organs and other necessary tissues out of the way in order to reach the spine. Your surgeon may choose to also perform a decompression and posterior spinal fusion (described above) during the same or during a separate procedure.



Incision: lower abdomen (anterior lumbar)

- **Lateral Lumbar Interbody Fusion (LLIF)**

In an LLIF, your surgeon will make an incision on the side of your abdomen in order to reach the spine. Your surgeon may choose to also perform a decompression and posterior spinal fusion (described above) during the same or a separate procedure.



Incision: side of abdomen (lateral lumbar)

* The placement of these implants is intended to assist in a healing process called **spinal fusion** (see Glossary). If successful, spinal fusion will typically take place in the weeks and months following surgery, and can be assessed by your surgeon on imaging studies (e.g. x-rays) taken during follow up visits.

Glossary

Bone spurs: bony projections that can develop as a result of the natural aging process

Donor bone: bone graft that comes from a donor and is referred to as allograft bone. Allograft bone usually comes from bone banks that harvest the bone from cadavers

Foraminotomy: surgical removal of a portion of the foramen, the opening through which the spinal nerves pass on their way from the spinal canal to the arms or legs

Interbody space: the space between two vertebrae where the intervertebral disc is located

Intervertebral disc: soft structure found between each of the spinal bones (vertebrae), that acts as a shock absorber

Laminectomy: surgical removal of the entire lamina, a bone at the back of the spine

Laminotomy: surgical removal of a portion of the lamina, a bone at the back of the spine

Natural bone material: bone material that can come either from a patient's own body (autograft) or be donated (see **donor bone**) from a bone bank after being harvested from a cadaver (allograft)

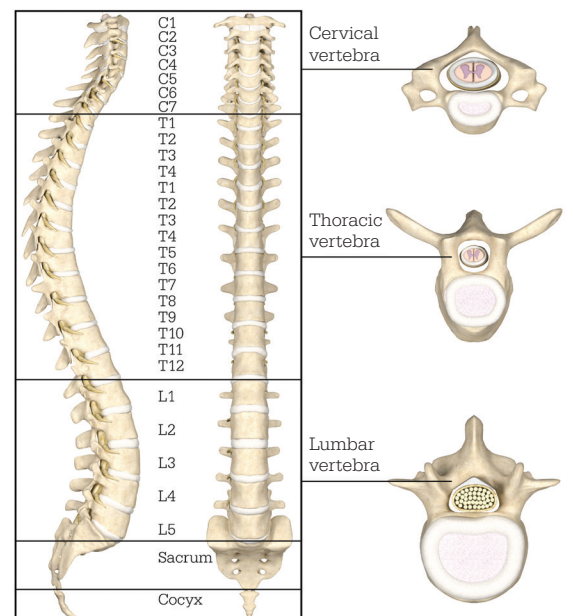
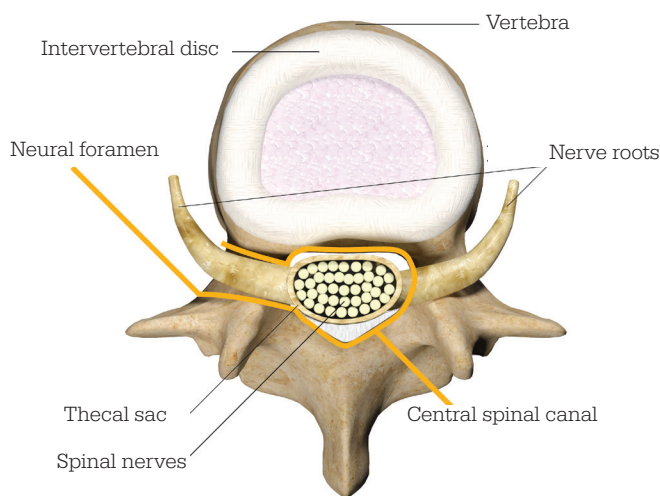
Spinal fusion: permanent connection of two or more vertebrae in the spine, eliminating motion between them. Spinal fusion involves techniques that are designed to mimic the normal healing process of broken bones

Thecal sac: soft tubular structure that contains the spinal nerves

Transforaminal: through the foramen, or opening through which the spinal nerves pass on their way from the spinal canal to the arms or legs

Vertebra/Vertebral body: spinal bone

Key spinal structures to know



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