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Question:

I fell down some stairs and injured my back a year ago. The pain is so bad I can no longer work, shop or even stand for very long. So far, nothing has given me any relief. Is there anyone who can help?

Answer:

Physicians who specialize in pain management, often anesthesiologists, are experts in treating chronic low back pain. About 80 to 90 percent of the time, patients will get pain relief.

What will a pain management specialist do?

The specialist will give a complete physical evaluation and review your medical history to determine the source of your pain. He or she will recommend treatment options, possibly including a psychological evaluation. Patients with chronic pain can become depressed.

What sort of treatments can be used to relieve my pain?

Many patients experience relief with a series of lumbar epidural steroid injections. This procedure bathes the nerves with a local anesthetic and steroid. It is combined with physical therapy and oral medications. Patients with more complicated situations may require advanced treatments, such as spinal cord stimulators, implanted medication infusion pumps or destruction of nerves.

A spinal cord stimulator can help when a patient's pain is localized to the arms or legs. A small electrode is implanted near the spine using a needle and connected to a battery controlled by a programmable device. The stimulator sends out small electrical impulses that block the patient's pain.

An infusion pump can help when a patient requires a high dose of narcotics. The pump is implanted under the skin and connected to a catheter, which is placed in the spinal fluid. This computer-controlled pump delivers pain-relieving medicine near the spinal nerves for greatest effect. The pump offers continuous pain relief with less medicine and fewer side effects.

Are these treatments long-term solutions?

Many patients obtain long-term pain relief from epidural steroid injections, with occasional follow-up treatment. An infusion pump or spinal cord stimulator can also provide long-term relief.