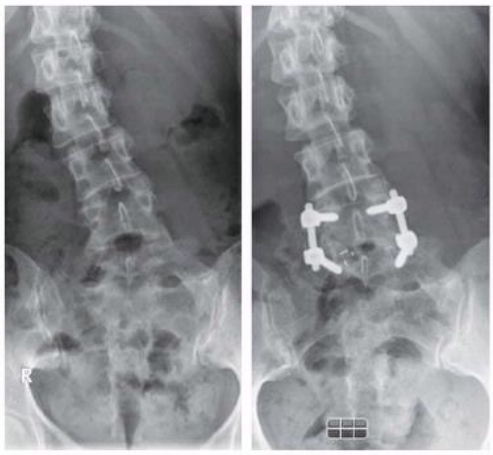
On The Other Side Of Pain

High-Tech Surgery Restores Young Nurse's Back

At 28 years old, Jennifer Fettig should have been enjoying an active life working as a nurse and living in the beautiful seaside city of San Diego. Instead, she was plagued by excruciating back and leg pain that significantly affected her daily life. “The pain became gradually worse to the point where I couldn’t stand for very long or walk without having to sit down,” she says. “It hurt to just lie down and sleep. I couldn’t hang out with friends, and it was very hard to explain to people what was wrong because I was so young.”



BEFORE AND AFTER: In the posterior lumbar interbody fusion procedure, all of the damaged disc material is removed and the level of the spine that is injured is rebuilt using a cage or spacer (above, right) and a bone graft. Screws and rods are used to hold everything together until the bone heals.

Jennifer tried all sorts of non-invasive treatments to ease the discomfort — physical therapy, chiropractic, over-the-counter medications — but nothing helped the pain. “It was just getting worse,” she recalls. “Eventually it got to the point where I couldn’t work anymore.” Finally, her mother, a trauma nurse in the Coachella Valley where Jennifer grew up, recommended she consult Shahin Etebar, MD, Board Certified Neurosurgeon and President of the Medical Staff at Eisenhower Medical Center.

Jennifer met with Dr. Etebar who definitely thought she needed back surgery. “Jennifer was very healthy, but she was in a lot of pain due to a herniated disc,” says Dr. Etebar. He recommended a posterior lumbar interbody fusion for Jennifer. Jennifer recalls her initial reaction, “It was really scary. You hear so many back surgeries don’t go well and that people still have pain.”

Being a nurse, Jennifer did a lot of research on her options and eventually opted for the surgery. “This is actually a fantastic operation and the results are excellent. Most patients who have this done have great results,” says Dr. Etebar who has performed the surgery on patients from 15 to 93 years of age. In the procedure, all of the damaged disc material is removed and the level of the spine that is injured is rebuilt using a cage or spacer and a bone graft. Screws and rods are used to hold everything together until the bone heals. Patients wear a rigid, turtle shell brace to provide support and to keep them from bending and twisting during recovery.

Jennifer noticed relief immediately after surgery. “A lot of my pain was the result of decompressed nerves, so once they were freed, I got so much pain relief,” she says. “I was walking around the day after surgery and already feeling better. I wanted to recover with my parents since my mom is a nurse, so I stayed in Palm Desert for a couple months recovering and receiving physical therapy. About four months after I had the procedure, I returned to light duty work.”

Jennifer has since returned to full-time work, exercising, and her first love — traveling. “I think Dr.

Etebar is awesome. I owe my life and health to him," says Jennifer. "I also found an amazing physical therapist I work with. I have a little pain now, but it's definitely manageable. I would say the whole thing was as successful as it could have been."

According to Dr. Etebar, patients needing back surgery have many more options today. "Technology has evolved significantly in the last 20 years. We have more options to offer our patients now — we can do minimally invasive fusions, total disc replacements, and we have new grafting materials," notes Dr. Etebar. "Still, you have to choose the right operation for the right patient. Not every technology is going to be an effective solution for every single person. Choosing the right operation for the right person will improve outcomes."

HealthNotes is a publication of Eisenhower Medical Center · © Copyright 2013 All Rights Reserved · www.emc.org