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A CENTER OF EXCELLENCE FOR BONE AND JOINT CARE

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Physician Publication

Get Back On Your Bike

By John A. O'Connell, MD

You're just finishing your Saturday morning bike ride. It's been a long busy week at work and the ride really helped you blow off some steam. As you reach down to get your water bottle you feel a sharp snap in your back, like you've just been stabbed. You're barely able to get back in the house and on the couch. The rest of the weekend is spent resting, taking pain relievers and trying to get better. By Monday, you feel well enough to go to work but just as your back pain is beginning to ease up, your leg feels like it's been stuck in an electrical socket. You think you'd rather just have the back pain; you just want that leg pain to go away.

What happened?

Back pain that turns into leg pain is usually caused by a herniated disc in your lower back. What happened was that a soft tissue structure in your back called a disc has weakened and deformed. It's now crushing the nerve in your back that goes to your leg. The nerve becomes irritated and causes pain.

Is this serious?

Rarely. Herniated discs can cause a serious, permanent condition resulting in permanent weakness and loss of bowel function. Although this is uncommon, it's a good idea to see your doctor soon. If you are experiencing any loss of bowel or bladder function, this is an emergency and should be treated immediately!

But I was just reaching to get my water bottle, I wasn't doing anything unusual.

Herniated discs are often caused by many small injuries rather than one big one. Eventually they all add up and cause severe pain.

What do I do next?

A physiatrist is a doctor who specializes in treating problems with muscles and bones. Your visit will include a very thorough evaluation to determine if you have any serious injuries, as well as anything abnormal about your posture and muscles that may have led to this injury.

Your visit is the start of your rehabilitation plan which includes medication, therapy and occasionally, spinal injections. This is often referred to as pain management if you are unable to tolerate your therapy.

Will I need surgery?

Probably not. Statistically, over 90 percent of patients with your injury do just fine without surgery. Usually, the rehabilitation program will not only have you feeling better, but will help you avoid injury in the future, so you can get back on the bike!

