

# Getting an Accurate Back Pain Diagnosis: Why is it so Important to your Recovery?

Dr. Connie D'Astolfo, DC, PhD (candidate)

In past articles I have stressed that the causes of back pain can be very complex. This complexity can make it more difficult to get an accurate diagnosis for back pain than for other medical conditions. While some spinal diagnoses can be straightforward (such as tumors, infections, or fractures), for many other spinal conditions such as disc herniations, spinal stenosis, sprain/strains, there is little agreement among doctors and spine specialists on what is causing your pain.

Different causes of back pain will require very different treatment approaches, thus getting an accurate diagnosis of the cause of back pain is absolutely critical. And the sooner an accurate diagnosis is made, the sooner the patient can find an appropriate treatment for pain relief and to improve his or her quality of life.

## The Causes of Back Pain Are Complex

Despite all the advances in medical care, there is still a lot that medical science does not yet understand. This is particularly true about spine pain disorders. Causes of back pain can be very complex and multi-factorial including physical injury and deterioration, postural aberrations, incorrect gait and movement patterns, psychological stress, depression and anxiety-making it difficult at times to get an accurate diagnosis. Ideally, taking a proactive approach and understanding the process of getting a proper diagnosis from the right expert can help you get on the road to recovery sooner.

## Diagnostic Studies Should be used to Confirm a Lesion NOT for a Diagnosis

The most common diagnostic tests for back pain include the following:

- X-rays provide detail of the bone structures in the spine, and are used to check for instability (such as spondylolisthesis), osteoarthritis, osteoporosis, tumors and fractures.
- CT scans, provide excellent bony detail and are also capable of imaging for specific conditions, such as a herniated disc or spinal stenosis.
- MRI scans are particularly useful to assess certain conditions by providing detail of the disc (such as for degenerative disc disease, isthmic spondylolisthesis) and nerve roots (such as for herniated discs or spinal stenosis). MRI scans are also useful to rule out tumors or spinal infections.

These tests are essential to locate lesions but need to be correlated with

clinical symptoms and signs to make an accurate diagnosis.

## When No Anatomical Reason for the Back Pain Can Be Found

While it is difficult to believe, despite a battery of diagnostic tests many times there is no anatomical reason that can be found that can account for a patient's pain. However, even if the doctor cannot identify any physical causes of the patient's pain, the pain is still real and needs to be managed. This may be common in many chronic back pain conditions.

In these cases the focus should be on providing diagnosis, treatment, and techniques for self management and support resources, such as a support groups and psychological counselling.

### When a Diagnosis is Critical:

Are you or a loved one experiencing any of the following?

- Chronic/Persistent low back pain
- Persistent neck pain
- Headaches
- Abnormal gait or mobility issues
- Abnormal posture, i.e. slumping, uneven shoulders
- Pain or weakness in one leg or both legs
- Numbness or tingling in buttocks or legs or toes
- Depression and/or Anxiety
- Avoidance of recreational activities
- Difficulty in Normal Activities of Daily Living

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Dr. Connie D'Astolfo, DC, PhD (c) is a chiropractor and the director of SPINEgroup® an integrated medical rehab clinic located in Vaughan. Dr. D'Astolfo is currently pursuing a PhD at York University. She has several published peer reviewed articles and is a chapter author for several medical texts.

Her interests include chronic disease prevention and management, spinal disorders and rehabilitation. You can visit our website at [www.spinegroup.ca](http://www.spinegroup.ca) or contact our client care representative at 905-850-7746 for more information on our clinical programs including our popular Spine Care Program.

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