This Month’s Question:

Do Low-Speed Vehicle Collisions Cause Intervertebral Disc Degeneration or Herniation?

MD Legal Consulting Answer:

Complaints of spinal pain are common after motor vehicle collisions. If there is litigation, evaluators maybe ask whether the collision caused permanent injury to the spine, including aggravating intervertebral disc degeneration (IDD) and/or causing disc herniation. IDD is part of the normal aging process and occurs at some point in all humans. Its prevalence and severity are proportional to age.

Spinal pain, particularly lumbar pain, is common. Many people will be involved in a low-speed MVC in their lifetime. Sometimes it is alleged that the MVC caused the IDD. Hence, the question arises, is there causal relationship between a common occurrence and an inevitable condition or are the two coincidental? Causation analysis must be based on the facts and science, not nearly a temporal relationship and/or opinion.

What has been called degenerative disc disease is now considered to be an aging process like graying of hair, wrinkling of skin, and other age-related changes and is not felt to be a disease. Degenerative disc disease is now labeled as intervertebral disc degeneration in the latest revision of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases.

Intervertebral disks progressively degenerate over time, although at variable rates depending on the location within the spine, genetics, and other factors. There is no clear
correlation between IDD and spinal pain. Many people without spinal pain have significant disc degeneration and other disc abnormalities when scanned.

According to low back pain clinical guidelines of the American College of Physicians, many abnormalities detected with advanced imaging (MRI) are so common in asymptomatic persons that they could be viewed as normal signs of aging; 36% asymptomatic persons age 60 years or older had a herniated disc, 21% had spinal stenosis, and more than 90% had a degenerative or bulging disc.

What causes the nucleus pulposus of disks to herniate and impinge on the spinal cord and/or nerve roots has been extensively studied and debated. Disc bulges and protrusions can occur slowly over years and after numerous force applications. There is no evidence that a single trauma causes extrusion of disc material without also causing damage to the surrounding bone and/or ligaments; and that type of damage is not seen in low impact injuries.

Summary:

Intervertebral disc degeneration and disc lesions are common findings that may or not be symptomatic. Low-speed motor vehicle collisions are also common and may cause muscle strain and accompanying symptoms. However, the motions, forces, and accelerations generated in low speed collisions are less than those encountered in activities of everyday living. The scientific process of injury causation analysis leads to the conclusion that disc degeneration and disc herniations are pre-existing and not caused by low impact vehicle collisions. While the pain caused by a muscle strain associated with a low-speed collision may prompt X-rays, an MRI scan, or other imaging study and reveal disc pathology, the two are coincidental and not causally related.

Let Us Know How We Can Help You

We Offer:
• On and off site review of case validity and value
• Help with strategies to promote medical theories
• Sitting in on IME’s
• Answering questions about causation of injuries
• Interpretation of meaning, or lack thereof, of medical reports & records
• Table-side deposition assistance or preparation of questions for expert witnesses
• Referral to appropriate expert medical witnesses
• Medical research
• Facilitation of communication with clients, families, professionals and service
  & governmental agencies
• Case Coordination

As you know, **we have purposefully kept our fees exceptionally low** allowing you to
have us review cases at the outset of your representation while controlling your expenses.

**CONTACT US for information or fee schedule.**

[DrFitz@mdlc1.com](mailto:DrFitz@mdlc1.com)

[401-741-4584](tel:401-741-4584)  [www.mdlc1.com](http://www.mdlc1.com)

Please pass this Newsletter along to your colleagues.