



Elizabeth Briscoe loves taking care of children.

We've got your back

Two accounts of spine surgery

Back pain can happen at any age, but you don't need to suffer. Just ask Elizabeth Briscoe, 65, and Arati Singh, 27. Both women experienced excruciating back pain and found relief at the Holy Cross Hospital Spine Center—a leader in the field of minimally invasive spine surgery. Thanks to our spine specialists, Arati and Elizabeth are back to doing what they love.

Elizabeth's story: Taking a stand

Elizabeth's back pain started suddenly in November 2006.

"I was on the treadmill trying to lose weight when a terrible pain went down my leg," the 65-year-old says. "After several days, the pain did not go away, so I went to see my doctor."

For the next 2½ years, Elizabeth bravely struggled to fight the pain. She tried anti-inflammatory medicine, steroids, pain medicine, physical therapy, epidural blocks and other treatments.

"But nothing worked for long," she says. "I couldn't drive, and some nights I had to sleep standing up supported by furniture."

Philip Schneider, MD, orthopedic spine surgeon, medical director, Holy Cross Hospital Spine Center, diagnosed

Elizabeth with a damaged spinal disc (extruded disc herniation) and degenerative disc disease.

"The spine is a complicated area, but accurately identifying the cause of the pain helps determine the most beneficial treatment for each person's unique spine condition," Dr. Schneider says.

He performed a minimally invasive laminectomy and spinal fusion in April. The laminectomy removed a bone and ligament that were pressing on the spinal nerves and also corrected the extruded disc herniation. To treat the degenerative disc disease, two vertebrae in the spine were fused together so that no motion occurs between them.

"I consider surgery a last resort, after patients have tried many different pain management therapies and medications," Dr. Schneider says. "Not only had Ms. Briscoe tried many types of pain management, her pain was getting worse."

The surgery was successful.

"When I came to, all I could say was, 'I have no pain' over and over again," Elizabeth says. "I am so thankful to Dr. Schneider."

Elizabeth spent two days in the Holy Cross Hospital Spine Center.

"Instead of the physical therapists working to get me moving, they actually had to slow me down," she says.

Our specialists are at the forefront of progress in spine treatments, especially in minimally invasive surgery.

While Elizabeth had no pain after surgery, she experienced severe nerve damage from her injury that needed time to properly heal.

“It was a great experience,” she says. “I keep asking myself, ‘Why didn’t I have surgery sooner?’”

Arati’s story: Back to the books

Arati was almost forced to abandon her dream of becoming a doctor because of the excruciating pain from a condition rare among young adults—a herniated disc in her spine.

Last December, the 27-year-old was home in Northern Virginia for a semester break from medical school when her back pain became so severe she could no longer ignore it.

“I woke up one morning and collapsed when I got out of bed,” she says. “I couldn’t walk or sit. I was comfortable only lying on my stomach.”

Although Arati had experienced back pain over the years, it had progressively gotten worse during medical school.

“I used to be very active, but in medical school I sit for hours and hours studying,” Arati says. “Sitting is the worst position for the spine.”

For several months, Arati tried different types of pain management options, such as pain relievers, muscle relaxers, anti-inflammatory medicine, acupuncture and steroid shots.

Still in agony, Arati realized she could not go back to school.

“I couldn’t sit for longer than two minutes at a time, so I really had no choice,” she says. “I was desperate for pain relief.”

In April, Arati went to see Amin Amini, MD, medical director, Neurosurgery, Holy Cross Hospital, and her quest for pain relief started to look brighter.



Arati Singh is studying to become a doctor.

“Due to the severity of the disc herniation, and the fact that no other treatment options were helping to alleviate her pain, we decided to proceed with surgery,” Dr. Amini says. “In June, I performed a minimally invasive microdiscectomy using a surgical microscope, which is one of the latest surgical techniques used to treat herniated discs and other spinal disorders.”

In the procedure, a small portion of the bone over the nerve root or disc material from under the nerve root is removed to relieve neural impingement and create more room for the nerve to heal. Because the procedure leaves nearly all of the joints, ligaments and muscles intact, it does not change the mechanical structure

of the patient’s spine.

Arati spent one night at Holy Cross Hospital, and today she is back at medical school.

“I have my life back, and I am so thankful,” she says. “Dr. Amini patiently answered all of my questions and thoroughly discussed all of my options—and he seemed genuinely happy to do this. When it’s my turn to treat patients, I will remember how Dr. Amini cared for me—both medically and as a person.”

» To learn more about treatment options for back pain or to be referred to a specialist for a spine assessment, call 301-754-7929 or visit www.holycrosshealth.org.