



Back

To Work After Minimally Invasive Surgery

When his children were young, Richard Matthews, a 49-year-old construction site supervisor from Toms River, N.J., was very limited in the activities he could enjoy with them. He used to love tossing his young daughter in the air while they were swimming, but severe back pain prevented him from doing so.

Having been a plumber for most of his career, his everyday job responsibilities took a toll on his body, especially his back.

“Despite the pain, I had to go to work to support my family. My kids saw that the only thing I could do was go to work and then come home,” he said.

With a physically demanding job, Richard saw the effects of his back pain at work, too. “I couldn’t lift anything or climb.

I had to spend a lot of time in crawl spaces, and the pain limited my ability to do my job,” he said. Initially, Richard was told he was physically undiagnosable. “Many doctors threw their hands up and said, ‘I don’t know what to tell you. I can’t figure out what’s wrong with you,’” said Richard.

Then he made an appointment with **Sripad Dhawlikar, MD**, a board-certified orthopedic spine surgeon at Community Medical Center, who went through diagnostic procedures to figure out what was wrong.

Dr. Dhawlikar diagnosed Richard with degenerative disc disease, saying that the decay of discs in his lower back caused his multiple back problems and limited his range of motion.

“He performed every non-invasive procedure to take me out of distress, but everything provided temporary relief. Dr. Dhawlikar spent many years suffering through injections with me, always telling me, ‘We’ll figure it out. We’re going to get you better,’” said Richard.

Richard’s pain became worse three years ago, when an MRI revealed he had a herniated disc in his neck that was putting pressure on his spinal cord, causing pain and numbness in his shoulders and hands. Dr. Dhawlikar performed a discectomy with fusion – the surgical removal of a herniated disc to eliminate pressure from the spinal cord – which relieved Richard’s neck pain. However, Richard’s back pain was still an ongoing issue.

“By fall 2011, I had enough. I couldn’t take it any more and wanted to get surgery to relieve the lower back pain and get control over my life again,” said Richard, who underwent his most recent surgery with Dr. Dhawlikar in March 2012.

“I performed a percutaneous lumbar discectomy with instrumentation and fusion, which involved using tiny incisions to remove the disc and take pressure off Richard’s nerve, as well as implanting a cage with a bone graft and securing everything with screws and rods,” said Dr. Dhawlikar. “The incisions are small enough to put band aids over them.”

“In the past, patients had bigger incisions with more blood loss, longer hospital stays and longer and more painful recovery times. This surgery is outpatient, involves minimal blood loss, and the patient is able to walk right after surgery,” said Dr. Dhawlikar, adding that Community Medical Center is one of the few hospitals in the area that offers this type of minimally invasive surgery.

Before surgery, Richard planned his work day so he could minimize his movements and the amount of walking. He used to dread the drive to work because the truck’s movement caused excruciating pain. “Previously, I moved as little as I had to. Now, when I have a project that requires me to worm through scaffolding – 40-50 feet in the air, I have no problems doing it. Six months ago, I wouldn’t be able to do it. I’m up and down ladders now,” said Richard.

At home, things are much different, too. “I can throw my granddaughter up in the air in the pool just like I used to do with my daughter before the pain became too bad. My kids hadn’t seen me do anything physical in a long time,” he said.

“It is very gratifying to see Richard back to his normal work routine that he loves and enjoying a happy life with his family with no disabilities and no pain medicines,” said Dr. Dhawlikar.

“Back pain sucks the life out of you. I became a miserable person because every day was such a struggle. Waking up in the morning and not having to deal with that is very different. The surgery was life-changing. I’m quite amazed where I am now,” said Richard.



Sripad Dhawlikar, MD
Board-certified Orthopedic spine surgeon
at Community Medical Center