

Patient Testimonial



Claire, XLIF® Patient

It may come as no surprise that back pain is one of the leading reasons for doctor visits in the United States. In fact, an estimated ten million adults suffer from chronic back pain each year in the U.S. alone. Claire, an active twenty-three year-old woman, is a part of that statistic. Luckily, Claire was not only able to find relief from her back and leg pain but she was able to return to her active lifestyle within a few months thanks to a new, minimally disruptive surgical procedure. In fact, sixteen months after having surgery, Claire competed in the 2009 Ironman triathlon, an extremely difficult race involving a 2.4 mile swim, a 112 mile bike-ride, and 26.2 mile marathon.

Claire, however, was not always able to live such an active lifestyle. At age seventeen, Claire began suffering from back and leg pain, which interfered with her daily life. In an effort to relieve the pain, Claire made an appointment with Dr. Antoine Tohmeh, an orthopaedic spine surgeon at the Orthopaedic Specialty Clinic of Spokane, WA. After evaluating Claire's condition, Dr. Tohmeh determined that her pain was caused by a herniated disc. When conservative (nonsurgical) treatment options did not relieve Claire's pain, Dr. Tohmeh suggested that she undergo microdiscectomy, a surgical procedure in which a small portion of bone or disc material is removed from the spine to relieve painful nerve impingement.



Ten months after having XLIF surgery, Claire returned to her active lifestyle.

In 2002, Claire underwent microdiscectomy at L4-5 and was quite pleased with the results. Then, two years later, her back and leg pain returned. Dr. Tohmeh performed a microdiscectomy on Claire for a recurrent disc herniation at the same level. "The recovery after both microdiscectomies was easy," recalls Claire. "I remember that one week after one of the surgeries I helped my Dad build a deck."

After the second microdiscectomy, Claire resumed her active lifestyle and would live relatively pain-free for the next few years. Unfortunately, Claire's back and leg pain returned again in 2007 and then intensified in early 2008. "I played volleyball and I was sore all the time," explains Claire. "Then in January of 2008, I picked up a kid at work and it made my back pain a lot worse." Claire suffered from severe lower back pain and numbness in her right leg. Her pain and discomfort began interfering significantly with her daily life. Claire works as a Child Life Specialist and she had difficulty meeting the basic physical demands of her job. "I had to take time off of work," says Claire. "When I returned to work, I couldn't do as much. I couldn't hold the kids. A lot of my time is spent bent over a stretcher for ten-to-fifteen minutes at a time. I couldn't bend forward and stay in that position."

In addition to affecting her professional life, Claire's pain prevented her from enjoying numerous activities that she loved. "I couldn't ski this winter," explains Claire. "I couldn't run. When I walked more than ten minutes, my toes would get numb. I couldn't sit for more than ten-to-fifteen minutes without being in pain. I'm an athlete, and when you can't even do normal activities, it's depressing."

Determined to find a solution, Claire made an appointment to see Dr. Tohmeh, and he ordered a discogram and an MRI to diagnose her condition. He determined that Claire had degenerative disc disease and suggested that she try conservative treatment options to relieve her pain. Claire took Dr. Tohmeh's advice and tried anti-inflammatory medication, magnetic therapy, and iced her back on a regular basis, but these treatments failed to provide long-term relief.

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Claire returned to Dr. Tohmeh for another appointment on February 14, 2008. "Claire was in more pain and she was miserable," recalls Dr. Tohmeh. "She was limping and had difficulty standing and flexing. Her condition had gotten worse." Given the severity of Claire's pain and the nature of her condition, Dr. Tohmeh suggested that she have a minimally disruptive XLIF® (eXtreme Lateral Interbody Fusion) procedure.

Unlike typical spine surgery approaches, the XLIF procedure, developed by NuVasive®, accesses the spine laterally, through the patient's side. This unique approach allows the surgeon to access the anterior spine without requiring the traditional abdominal incision of an anterior procedure or the dissection or retraction of the sensitive back muscles, bones, or ligaments that is typical of traditional posterior approaches. Therefore, the XLIF procedure yields patient benefits compared to traditional spine surgery, such as a shorter hospital stay, reduced recovery time, and minimal scarring. "I thought XLIF would be perfect for Claire," explains Dr. Tohmeh, who has performed over one hundred XLIF cases. "She had two previous surgeries and so she had posterior scar tissue. With XLIF, I could achieve a direct approach without cutting the tissue."



Sixteen months after having surgery,
Claire competed in the Ironman Triathlon.

On February 27, 2008, Dr. Tohmeh performed single-level XLIF surgery on Claire. "Dr. Tohmeh is a big advocate of the XLIF procedure and I trust him," says Claire. "I wouldn't let anyone else touch my back." Within days, Claire was walking and then was released from the hospital. By the end of April 2008, Claire was off all pain medication and started water aerobics to facilitate her recovery. She also started going back to work part-time and slowly eased into longer work days. "I'm still conscientious of picking up the kids at work because of my back," says Claire. "But a lot of my time is spent bent over a stretcher, and I can do that comfortably now."

Today, Claire is doing well. Not only did she plan a ski trip this past winter, but she also joined a volleyball league and started running, swimming, and biking again. In July 2008 (five months post-op), Claire competed in her first triathlon since the XLIF surgery and placed first in her age division. "To get to the finish line is more important than my time," explains Claire. "But knowing that I can finish and place is just huge." She also competed in the Ironman competition that took place over Father's Day weekend in 2009, and she completed the grueling 2.4 mile swim, 112 mile bike ride, and 26.2 mile run in 15 hours and 45 minutes. Not bad for a recent spine-surgery patient!

Overall, both Dr. Tohmeh and Claire are happy with the results of her XLIF® procedure. "I am very pleased," says Dr. Tohmeh. "Claire's a lot better now. She won a triathlon not too long ago!" Claire also agrees and believes that having the XLIF procedure improved her overall quality of life. "I am so happy with my results," exclaims Claire. "If I had to do it again, I would in a heartbeat."

As with any spine surgery, there are potential benefits and possible risks associated with the XLIF procedure. It is important that you discuss the potential risks, complications, and benefits of XLIF with your doctor prior to receiving treatment, and that you rely on your physician's judgment. Only your doctor can determine whether you are a suitable candidate for this treatment. You can find a surgeon in your area who performs the XLIF procedure by utilizing the Physician Locator on www.lateralaccess.org.