

Business Week

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Curing Without Cutting

Can you trust your doctor's recommendation to have surgery for an aching back? Make sure you have all the facts. Evidence says surgery does not fix the problem over the long term any better than time, physical therapy, and exercise. Indeed, says University of North Carolina's Dr. Nortin M. Hadler, pain clinics are full of people who have had back surgery and now are worse off. Geographic data suggest that such procedures may be a fad. In people with identical symptoms, operations like spinal fusion are performed 20 times as often in some parts of the U.S. as in others. "Spinal fusion is the most variable condition in all of medicine," says Dr. James N. Weinstein, editor of Spine magazine and chair of orthopedic surgery at Dartmouth.