

## Could Your Low Back Pain Actually Be SI Joint Pain?

by Max W. Cohen, MD, FAAOS

**L**ow back pain is a common problem as people age. However, it has been estimated that up to 25% of all pain in the lower back is actually caused by problems with the sacroiliac (SI) joint. SI joint pain often mimics the symptoms of low back pain. As a result, physicians frequently overlook the diagnosis of sacroiliac joint disease.

The SI joint, located in the pelvis, links the iliac bone (pelvis) to the sacrum (lowest part of the spine above the tailbone). This joint transfers weight and forces between the upper body and the legs. It is essential for shock absorption, helping to prevent impact forces during walking from reaching the spine. It is stabilized by a network of ligaments and muscles, which also limit motion.

### Causes of SI Joint Pain

Abnormal or asymmetric motion at the SI joint can cause pain. Previous fusion of the lumbar spine also can cause an abnormal transfer of stress to the SI joint, leading to pain. Like any other joint in the body, the SI joint can become arthritic or its support ligaments can become loose or injured. Additional causes of SI joint dysfunction include inflammatory conditions, fractures and congenital conditions.

### Risk Factors for SI Joint Problems

Previous lumbar spinal surgery can increase the risk of SI joint pain. Women also are at increased risk for SI joint problems because of their broader pelvises, their shorter limbs, and stretching of the ligaments in the pelvis during pregnancy.

### Symptoms of SI Joint Dysfunction

Pain in the SI joint often feels similar to back pain. You may have pain in the



buttock or higher on the skeleton, especially with lifting, running, walking, sitting or sleeping on the involved side. You may even experience numbness, tingling or weakness in the legs.

### Diagnosing SI Joint Dysfunction

Your doctor may order diagnostic imaging, including an X-ray, a CT scan or an MRI scan. Another condition (like a disc or hip problem) can co-exist with SI joint problems, so your doctor will likely check for other factors that may be causing your symptoms.

The most widely used method to accurately determine the cause of SI joint pain is to inject the SI joint with painkillers. Your doctor will use fluoroscopic or CT guidance to ensure that the needle is accurately placed in the sacroiliac joint. If your pain decreases a significant amount following the injection, then the SI joint is either the source of, or a major contributor to, your lower back pain. If the level of pain does not change after the injection, the SI joint is not the primary cause.

### Treatment of SI Joint Pain

Some patients respond to physical therapy, chiropractic manipulations, use of oral medications, injection therapy and intermittent use of a pelvic belt. If nonsurgical treatment methods do not provide relief, you may be a candidate for surgery.

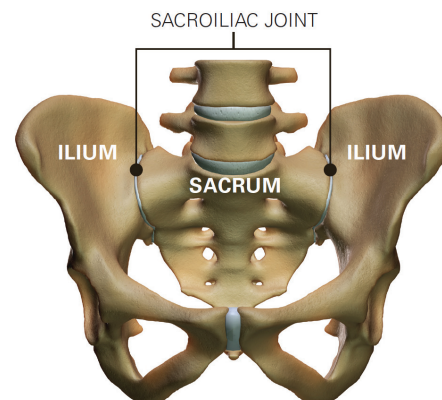
The doctors at Spine & Scoliosis Specialists offer a technologically advanced, minimally invasive surgical treatment option. Our physicians perform SI joint fusion using computer navigation, which allows for precise placement of stabilizing implants that decrease movement across the SI joint. This innovative technique requires only a small incision, leading to greatly reduced recovery time for patients. The procedure takes approximately an hour to complete and can be performed on an outpatient basis. Patients are able to walk better shortly after the procedure and often experience immediate pain relief. Full recovery typically occurs within 8 to 12 weeks.

### More Information

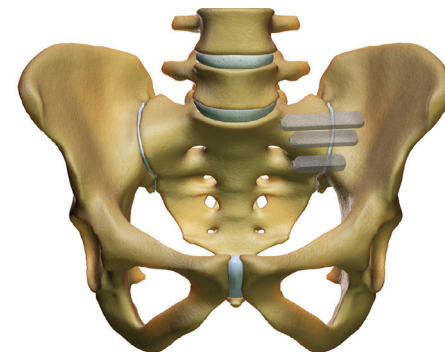
To learn more about treatment options for SI joint pain, schedule a consultation via our website at [www.spineand scoliosisdocs.com](http://www.spineand scoliosisdocs.com) or via phone at 336-333-6306.



Max W. Cohen, MD, FAAOS, is the founding physician of Spine and Scoliosis Specialists, the area's only comprehensive spine care center, offering multi-disciplinary care by specialists in spine injuries and diseases. Dr. Cohen is the only doctor in the Triad with double fellowship training in spine and scoliosis surgery. He completed his training at Cornell University's prestigious Hospital for Special Surgery, the top-ranked orthopaedics hospital in the U.S., according to U.S. News & World Report.



The sacroiliac joint



Stabilizing implants have been placed in the SI joint at right to decrease movement, thereby reducing pain.

*When You're in Pain...*

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Max W. Cohen, MD, FAAOS • Thomas R. Saullo, MD • Ruben Torrealba, MD

2105 Braxton Lane, Suite 101 • Greensboro, NC 27408