

## **Back pains**

Most back pains are benign and don't last for more than a few weeks. But, if the pain persists and causes fever, discomfort or sweating at night, be careful. It might be due to an infection in the spine. Although spinal infections account for only about 5 per cent of all infections, it can produce very serious consequences, such as spinal deformity and paraplegia (paralysis of the lower part of the body).

Spinal infection commonly occurs in the part of the spine between the neck and the abdomen (thoracic) or between the lowest rib and the pelvis (lumbar). Elderly people, patients with Diabetes Mellitus, chronic renal and liver disorders, auto-immune diseases, or patients using immuno-suppressive drugs, are more susceptible to spinal infections.

Symptoms of acute infections include persistent severe back pain, fever, body discomfort and night-sweating. But in the case of sub-acute and chronic infections, the symptoms can be subtle. Acute or sub-acute infections are commonly caused by bacteria, whereas chronic infections are usually caused by mycobacterium tuberculosis (the bacteria that causes tuberculosis). Apart from back pain, the infection can cause bone destruction and pus to develop, leading to spinal cord or cauda equina (tip of the spinal column) compression and neurological deficits, or complications. Severe neurological deficits can lead to total paraplegia, uncontrolled urine or bowel discharge and loss of sexual ability.

If the infection is detected early, a course of antibiotics lasting 6 to 12 weeks might be all that is required to treat the condition. If it is detected late, major surgery might be needed to drain the puss from the abscess and to decompress the neural tissue, but the patient might end up with long-term disability. If the symptoms you feel suggest that you may have a spinal infection, see a doctor as soon as possible.