

Approaching Back Pain in the Advanced Screening Tent

It is not uncommon for patients to report back pain when they present to the hospital. Many patients will present with a history of chronic back pain with acute exacerbation. This is not a reason to transfer the patient to the ED.

Transfer to the ED should only occur if there is concern for a surgical emergency. All other causes of back pain can be evaluated as an outpatient.

Conditions that require surgical evaluation include:

- Cauda equina
- Acute cord compression
- Epidural abscess
- Epidural hematoma

Red flags that are associated with these conditions include:

- Bowel or bladder overflow incontinence
- Significant weight loss
- Fevers and IVU
- Use of anticoagulants
- Sensory level cutoff on exam. Check to see if has numbness at the level of the nipple line and the umbilicus. Note lower extremity numbness and tingling is not the same as true sensory level cutoff where the patient cannot feel below the umbilicus or the nipple lines.

Advanced Screening Tent approach to the patient with back pain

Step 1: Do you have a history of chronic back pain and is this relatively the same type of pain that you have had before

If yes do not send to the ED and treat symptomatically

If no Proceed to step 2

Step 2: Ask patient if they have any of the red flags listed below

If Yes send to the ED

If No, do not send to the ED. Treat symptomatically and discharge home