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The Back Pain Report: How to Prevent and Treat Back Pain

Topics Covered:

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The Back Pain Report: How to Prevent and Treat Back Pain

Living with Back Pain

Back pain may be relieved with a variety of techniques. For most common occurrences of back pain, a regiment of rest, hot and cold compresses, exercise and therapy, as well as various pain medications can be used to reduce the pain and provide a level of comfort.

Rest will be necessary for your back to heal when suffering from acute back pain. However, you should try to maintain as much activity as is comfortable. Getting up and moving around can help ease stiffness and relieve pain.

Hot and cold compresses, used separately or by alternating, can have great benefit in reducing back pain. Heat is used to relax the muscles. It works by dilating the blood vessels, which improves the flow of oxygen to the affected area and reduces pain and muscle spasms. It is important to take care when applying heat to the lower back region. Constant heat for prolonged periods can have a negative effect on the organs in your abdominal region. Do not sleep with a heating pad on your back. Instead, apply heat for no more than 20 to 30 minutes. Cold packs are used to reduce inflammation, such as that from arthritis or injury.

This works by decreasing the size of blood vessels and the flow of blood to the area. Like heat packs, it is important to avoid prolonged application of cold packs. A simple solution for a cold pack is to take a bag of ice or frozen peas and wrap it in a towel.

Various stretching exercises can be used to reduce back pain by reducing back stiffness and possibly relieving compression on the spine. As well, suitable exercises will strengthen the muscles of the abdomen, buttocks, back and legs, which will provide better support to your back and help relieve pain. Your doctor or physical therapist can show you a set of exercises suitable for your condition.

Massage therapy is used by many to relieve back pain. Massage tries to stimulate blood flow to the affected area, and to relax the muscles of the lower back. Registered massage therapists can be found on-line or in your phone book.

Nonprescription medicines can be used to reduce pain. They include analgesic medications like aspirin and acetaminophen (Tylenol), which are meant for general pain relief. Topical analgesics include such as Zostrix, Icy Hot and Ben Gay can be effective in some cases where a pill-based medicine is not.

Other medicines, such as NSAIDs, or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, are used to reduce swelling. These include such nonprescription medications as ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil), ketoprofen (Actron, Orudis) and naproxen sodium (Aleve). Prescription medications are available if these medications do not prove effective.

You should call your family doctor if your pain remains after a couple of weeks, or if you feel any of these other symptoms:

- Pain in your leg below the knee
- Numbness in the legs or groin
- Fever, nausea or vomiting, stomach pain, weakness or sweating
- Loss of control over bathroom functions

Diagnosing Lower Back Pain

Back pain will inhibit millions of Americans this year, and for some, the pain can be excruciating. Back pain can be caused by a large number of injuries or conditions, thus making a proper diagnosis both difficult and critical. Back pain that occurs with other symptoms like fever and chills, severe abdominal pain or bladder and bowel problems can be an indication of a serious medical condition, and should be evaluated by your doctor immediately.

Lower back pain is classified into one of three categories, based on a description of how the pain is distributed throughout the body. These three categories are axial lower back pain (also known as mechanical or simple back pain), radicular lower back pain (also known as sciatica) and lower back pain with referred pain. We will now briefly examine the most common causes and treatments for each of these categories.

The most common type of lower back pain is axial. This pain is confined to the lower back area and does not radiate into the surrounding portions of the body. There are many causes of axial lower back pain, such as a degenerated disc or damage to the muscles, ligaments or tendons. However, in most cases, the treatment of axial lower back pain is not dependant on the cause.

The usual treatment is rest, exercises or physical therapy, the use of hot and/or cold compresses and various common pain medications. The exceptions to this would be for chronic pain or pain that is so severe that it wakes you up at night. In these cases, one should see their doctor.

Radicular lower back pain is caused by compression of the lower spinal nerve, leading to pain that radiates down the thighs and legs. The most common nerve affected is the sciatic nerve, which runs down the back of the thigh and calf into the foot. Sciatica may cause greater pain in the leg than in the back. This nerve compression can be caused by a herniated disc, a narrowing of the passage through which the nerve travels the spine, diabetes or nerve root injuries.

Usually sciatica is treated with physical therapy and medication for a period of six to eight weeks. If the pain persists, surgery may be done to relieve the compression.

Lower back pain with referred pain which spreads to other areas of the body can be caused by the same conditions which cause axial lower back pain, and the treatment is similar. It needs

to be carefully differentiated from radicular lower back pain, in which the pain spreads in very specific paths along certain nerves.

Most instances of back pain can be treated successfully with a combination of rest, physical therapy, hot and cold packs and pain medication. Only with severe or persistent pain should a more drastic treatment, such as surgery, be considered.

How to Prevent Back Pain

Simple lower back pain can be caused by straining the muscles, tendon or ligaments of the lower back. Often this is a result of heavy or awkward activity, especially if you are unused to it. Here are some tips to help prevent you from injuring your back, and becoming one of the millions of Americans who suffer from lower back pain.

The most effective prevention is to take care as to how you lift heavy objects. Do not try to lift any significant weight by bending over the object. You should bend your knees and then lift with your legs. Try to keep your back straight and hold the object close to your body. It is important to avoid twisting your body while lifting, which is the most common cause of a slipped disk.

When moving heavy objects, pushing is less stressful than pulling.

Routine activities, such as housework or gardening, can cause back pain. Try to avoid standing flat-footed while bent over. Placing one foot on a small stool or book while washing dishes or ironing can reduce the strain on your back. When vacuuming, try to move your whole body, using your legs to push.

A sedentary lifestyle will contribute to back problems.

Regular exercise will have great benefit to you. You should consider a set of stretching and other exercises to improve the flexibility and strength of the muscles which support your lower back. These include the abdominal muscles, as well as those in the legs and back. Simple exercises like partial sit-ups and bridges can help prevent back pain throughout your life. Obesity is a common cause of back pain. Aerobic exercise can help manage weight concerns. Swimming, jogging or even walking are all activities that will help you lose weight and feel better. Before starting any vigorous activity, make sure you do a proper warm-up with stretching.

In addition to exercise, a proper diet is essential in managing your weight. However, there are also two nutrients, calcium and vitamin D, that help build healthy and strong bones and prevent osteoporosis, which can cause bone fractures that lead to back pain.

Many people whose jobs involve sitting for long periods of time experience back pain. It is important to get up and move around regularly. If driving for long periods of time, take the time to stop and get out of your vehicle.

Stretching your muscles and improving blood flow to your lower body will help prevent back pain, as well as help keep you alert for the rest of your trip.

Changing the position in which you sleep can also help prevent back pain. The best positions are either to sleep lying on your side with your legs bent, or lying on your back with a pillow under your knees. A firm mattress is usually the best bet. A sheet of plywood can be placed between the box spring and the mattress in order to increase the firmness of your bed.

Risk Factors for Back Pain

It is estimated that 80% of all Americans will experience back pain in their lives. This means that it is likely you will suffer from back pain eventually. There are several risk factors that can contribute to the frequency and intensity back pain episodes. By being aware of them, you can modify your behavior to reduce your risk of suffering from back pain.

The most common age to first experience back pain is between 30 and 40. At this time the body is beginning to lose its flexibility. Back pain becomes more common with age, as the number of conditions that can cause back pain increase. Musculoskeletal strains are more common with younger people, while arthritis and degenerative disc disease tend to be leading causes of back pain among seniors.

People who live sedentary lifestyles are more likely to experience back pain than those who engage in regular activity. Those with a higher level of physical fitness generally have stronger muscles in the back, legs and abdomen, all of which help support the back. The exception to this is the so-called "Weekend Warriors", people who engage in vigorous activity only periodically, with little exercise in between. They are at the greatest risk of injuring themselves during their periods of exertion. Those who are least likely to suffer from back pain are those who engage in a moderate level of activity on a regular basis.

Perhaps the most significant risk factor is obesity. The strain of carrying excess weight can contribute greatly to back pain. Regular exercise and a balanced diet can help control obesity, and reduce the frequency of back pain episodes.

Having a job that requires heavy lifting, particularly while twisting or vibrating the spine, can lead to injury and back pain. It is important that if your job involves heavy lifting, pushing or pulling, you should make the effort to use proper techniques in order to protect your back.

Bend your knees and lift with your legs, keeping your back straight. Before starting your day, consider doing a series of stretching and strengthening exercises to loosen your back muscles and help prepare them for the work ahead.

A desk job may also lead to back pain, particularly if you sit all day in an uncomfortable chair or have bad posture. Try to sit straight with your feet firmly planted on the ground. Make sure your computer monitor is at the correct height, which is usually recommended to be that the top on the monitor is two inches above your eye level. Stretching activities done throughout the day can help to keep your back loose.

Although smoking may not directly cause back pain, it increases your risk of developing low back pain sciatica. Smoking may lead to pain by blocking your body's ability to deliver nutrients to the discs of the lower back.

Back Pain and Arthritis of the Spine

Arthritis is inflammation of the joints. There are more than 100 rheumatic diseases and conditions that are types of arthritis. They affect joints, the tissues which surround the joints and other connective tissue. Arthritis is characterized by pain and stiffness in and around one or more joints. There are three main types of arthritis that affect the spine. They are osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and ankylosing spondylitis.

Osteoarthritis is a disease in which the cartilage that cushions the ends of the bones at the joints wears away.

This causes the bones of the joint to rub together, causing pain, stiffness and bone spurs. The bone spurs can break off and float around in the joint, causing more damage and pain. The joint can become misshapen over time. Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis. Osteoarthritis usually first strikes after the age of 40, and becomes more likely with age. People with osteoarthritis usually have joint pain and limited movement.

Rheumatoid arthritis occurs when the body's immune system attacks the tissue that lines the joints, the synovial membrane. White blood cells, the agents of the immune system, travel to the synovium and cause inflammation (synovitis). During the inflammation process, the normally thin synovium becomes thick and makes the joint swollen and puffy to the touch, leading to joint pain and inflammation. The inflamed synovium leads to erosion of the cartilage and bone within the joint. The muscles, ligaments and tendons around the joint weaken, and provide less support to the joint.

Rheumatoid arthritis is usually accompanied by fatigue and fevers. It usually begins in middle age and is more common in women than men.

Ankylosing spondylitis is a chronic form of arthritis that affects the spine and the sacroiliac joint, where the spine meets the pelvis. It can also affect the hips and shoulders. In severe cases, bone spurs form on the vertebrae. These can fuse the vertebrae together, causing the spine to become rigid, resulting in a great loss of mobility. Ankylosing spondylitis is most often first diagnosed in young men, usually under the age of 35.

Arthritis is typically treated with medication, either a pain reliever or an anti-inflammatory. Pain relievers include analgesic medications like aspirin and acetaminophen (Tylenol). Topical analgesics such as Zostrix, Icy Hot and Ben Gay can be effective in some cases where a pill-based medicine is not. NSAIDs, or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, are used to reduce swelling. These include such nonprescription medications as ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil), ketoprofen (Actron, Orudis) and naproxen sodium (Aleve).

Stronger prescription-based anti-inflammatories are available, including COX-2 inhibitors like celecoxib, which may be easier on the stomach than traditional NSAIDs.

Exercises will also be used to increase range of motion. These include various stretching and strengthening exercises to reduce the damage of the arthritis.

Exercising and Back Pain

Exercising is of great benefit both to someone suffering from back pain and for anyone hoping to avoid it in the future. If you are suffering from acute back pain, exercising may not be possible or even a good idea.

However, for chronic back pain, a regular exercise program will probably be recommended by your doctor. Either your physician or a physical therapist can help you in developing an exercise plan that is suitable for you and your condition. You will want to include the following types of exercises.

Stretching exercises are designed to improve the extension of the muscles and soft tissues. This can reduce stiffness and increase range of motion. Typical stretching exercises for the back include lying on your back and raising each leg to your chest, as well as bridges and hamstring stretches.

The purposes of flexion exercises, which are exercises in which you bend forward, are to widen the spaces between the vertebrae. This relieves pressure on the nerves, and stretches the muscles of the back and hips. They will also strengthen the muscles that support the spine, those of the back, abdomen and legs.

With extension exercises, you bend backward. They open up the spinal canal in places and develop muscles that support the spine. Extension exercises may minimize radicular pain, which is pain that radiates to other parts of the body besides the back, especially the legs and lower extremities. Extension exercises include leg lifts and trunk raises.

Aerobic exercise is the type that gets your heart rate elevated for a period of time. It is also known as cardiovascular exercise. It is recommended to get at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise three times a week. Aerobic exercises are good for working the large muscles of the back and core. For those with back problems, walking, jogging and swimming may be suitable aerobic activities. For back problems, you should avoid exercise that requires twisting or vigorous bending, like aerobics and rowing, as well as contact sports like football or hockey,

because these activities may cause more damage to your back. Especially avoid high-impact activities if you have any sort of disc disease. If back pain or your fitness level makes it impossible to exercise 30 minutes at a time, try three 10-minute sessions to start with and work up to your goal.

Obesity is a common cause of back pain. The strain of carrying excess weight can contribute greatly to back pain. Regular exercise and a balanced diet can help control obesity, and reduce the frequency of back pain episodes. Aerobic exercise can help manage weight concerns. Swimming, jogging or even walking are all activities that will help you lose weight and feel better.

If you suffer from back pain, it is important to make sure that you are doing the right exercises and that you are doing them properly. A physical therapist can help you develop proper techniques so that you can derive the maximum benefit for your exercise and avoid injuring yourself further.

Chiropractors and Back Pain

Chiropractors treat health problems that are associated with the body's muscular, nervous, and skeletal systems, especially the spine. The science of chiropractic is mainly based around spinal manipulation. With manipulation, a practitioner will use their hands to mobilize, adjust, massage, or stimulate the spine or surrounding tissues. The purpose of spinal manipulation is to restore joint mobility by applying a controlled force into joints that have become restricted in their movement.

The word chiropractic comes from the Greek words chiro and praktikis, and roughly means done by hand.

This refers to how a chiropractor will use their hands to manipulate the spine. Chiropractic is a healing discipline based on science. Although its main focus is the relationship between the skeleton and the nervous system, chiropractic is concerned with the entire body.

Chiropractic is by far the most popular form of alternative health care, and uses a holistic approach in its treatment.

Chiropractors believe the correct alignment of the spine is necessary for the nervous system to function properly.

The theory is that the body cannot function and heal itself without the nervous system being free of interference. The interference with these systems impairs the body's normal functions and lowers its resistance to disease. The spine is the most common site of nervous interference because nerves travel from the spinal cord through openings on either side of the spine to get to all of your cells and organs.

Chiropractic adjustments involve applying a controlled, sudden force to a joint. It is a non-invasive, manual procedure that utilizes the skills developed through intensive chiropractic education. Adjustment is a carefully controlled procedure delivered by a skilled practitioner. The primary goal is to decrease pain and to improve range of motion in the joints and supporting tissues.

Like other health practitioners, chiropractors will take the patient's medical history, conduct various examinations; and may order laboratory tests in order to make a diagnosis and develop a treatment. X-rays and other diagnostic images are important tools to a chiropractor as they show the position of the spine and its alignment.

Chiropractors practice a drug-free, manual approach to health care that includes patient assessment, diagnosis and treatment. Chiropractors are also trained to recommend therapeutic exercise, to utilize other non-invasive therapies, as well as to provide nutritional, dietary and lifestyle counseling.

Some chiropractors use treatments in addition to spinal manipulation. These include therapy using water, light, massage, ultrasound, electric impulses, acupuncture and heat. They also may apply supports such as straps, tapes, and braces. Chiropractors counsel patients about wellness concepts such as nutrition, exercise, changes in lifestyle, and stress management, but do not prescribe drugs or perform surgery.

Chiropractic training is a 4-year academic program. It consists of both classroom and clinical instruction.

Students are only eligible for chiropractic training after first completing at least three years of college. Students who graduate receive the degree of Doctor of Chiropractic (D.C.). All chiropractors are regulated by their state's license board.

Massage Therapy and Back Pain

A registered massage therapist is a trained in the assessment and diagnosis of injuries of the soft tissue and joints of the body. They use a blend of modern science and ancient philosophies to treat many conditions. A massage therapist has many potential treatments at their disposal.

Massage therapy is becoming more widely accepted in the medical community as a credible treatment for many types of back pain. Studies have shown that massage therapy can benefit back pain sufferers by increasing blood flow and circulation, decreasing tension in the muscles, reducing pain caused by tight muscles and even improving sleep. Massage therapy can provide relief for many common conditions that cause back pain, such as arthritis, fibromyalgia, sports injuries and various other soft tissue sprains and strains.

Massage is non-invasive and considered very low risk for most people. In addition to physical benefits, massage is usually very relaxing. This can have profound psychologically benefits,

particularly to someone suffering from chronic back pain. Depression is a symptom of chronic pain. Massage is thought to release endorphins, those natural chemical of the body that make you feel good and act as pain suppressors.

It is estimated that 75% of healthcare providers have sent patients of theirs to a massage therapist. If appropriate, you may want to ask your physician for a referral to a massage therapy professional in your area.

Most episodes of acute lower back pain are caused by muscle strain, such as from lifting a heavy object, or a traumatic injury like a sudden movement or a fall. The low back pain can be very severe and last anywhere from several hours to a couple of weeks. When back muscles are strained or torn, they can become inflamed.

With inflammation, the muscles in the back can spasm and cause both severe lower back pain and difficulty moving. Massage can help work out the spasm/irritation and improve range of motion. The large upper back muscles are also prone to irritation, either due to weakness or overuse.

Spinal arthritis is the inflammation of the joints of the spine. It can cause the breakdown of the cartilage between the aligning facet joints in the back portion of the spine. As the facet joints become inflamed they create frictional pain as bone rubs on bone. Therapeutic massage can help reduce osteoarthritis pain by improving circulation and reducing stress and muscle tension. However, it is important to find a professional who is specifically trained in treating people with arthritis.

Fibromyalgia is a widespread musculoskeletal pain and fatigue disorder for which the cause is still unknown. Fibromyalgia means pain in the muscles, ligaments, and tendons, and is usually characterized by pain, stiffness and fatigue. The patient typically feels both widespread pain and pain in specific points as evidenced by physical examination. Massage can target both the tender points and the more broadly distributed pain and stiffness.

Although massage therapy is relatively safe, it is always advisable for patients to first check with their doctor before any treatment. Massage may not be suitable to those who have had recent surgery or who suffer from osteoporosis.

Alternative Therapy for Back Pain

There are a wide variety of alternative treatments for back pain. Most of the studies of these therapies have proved inconclusive. Some people will claim certain treatments will cure anything, especially if they have a financial interest in it. However, many people have obtained benefits from the treatments described below.

Traction involves using pulleys and weights to stretch the back. The rationale behind traction is to pull the vertebrae apart to allow a bulging disc to slip back into place. Some people experience pain relief while in traction, but that relief is usually temporary. Once traction is

released back pain is likely to return. Corsets and braces limit the motion of the lumbar spine, provide abdominal support, and correct posture. They are of most use after certain surgeries.

Various injections can be used to relieve chronic back pain if medication and other non-surgical treatments fail. Some of the most commonly used injections include nerve root blocks, facet joint injections, and trigger point injections. Prolotherapy is a treatment in which a sugar solution or other irritating substance is injected into the periosteum, the fibrous tissue covering the bones, in order to strengthen the attachment of tendons and ligaments.

Spinal manipulation is done by chiropractors and osteopathic doctors. With manipulation, a practitioner will use their hands to mobilize, adjust, massage, or stimulate the spine or surrounding tissues. The purpose of spinal manipulation is to restore joint mobility by applying a controlled force into joints that have become restricted in their movement. Spinal manipulation is not an appropriate treatment for osteoporosis, spinal cord compression, or arthritis.

Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) uses mild electric impulses to stimulate the nervous system in the pained area. It is thought that TENS may elevate the levels of endorphins, the body's natural pain-numbing chemicals, in the spinal fluid.

Acupuncture is an ancient Chinese practice that is based on the theory that a life force called Qi flows through the body. If the flow is impeded, the body can become ill. Acupuncture involves the insertion of thin needles at precise locations to unblock the flow of Qi, relieving pain and restoring health. Some studies have indicated that inserting and then stimulating needles (by twisting or passing a low-voltage electrical current through them) may foster the production of endorphins.

Acupressure is similar to acupuncture in that it seeks to unblock the flow of Qi. The difference between acupuncture and acupressure is that no needles are used in acupressure.

Acupressure is more like massage therapy, where a therapist will use their hands, elbows, feet and knees to apply pressure to certain precise portions of the patient's body.

Another type of massage, Rolfing, uses strong pressure on deep tissues in the back to relieve tightness of the fascia, a sheath of tissue that covers the muscles. It seeks to improve posture and structure by manipulating the body's myofascial system

Surgery for Back Pain

While the majority of treatment for lower back pain is non-surgical, there are some conditions for which surgery is appropriate. As well, in some rare cases, surgery can be used to treat chronic back pain for which other treatments have failed. Below we list some common conditions that may be treated surgically, and describe the treatments used.

A herniated disc occurs when the hard outer coating of the discs, the circular pieces of connective tissue that cushion the vertebrae, are damaged. These discs may leak, irritating nearby nerves. A herniated disc is also known as a ruptured disc. A herniated disk can cause severe sciatica, nerve pain that radiates down the leg.

Herniated discs may be treated surgically by discectomy, either laminectomy, microdiscectomy or laser discectomy. In a laminectomy, part of the lamina, a portion of the bone on the back of the vertebrae, is removed. The herniated disc is then removed through this cut. In microdiscectomy a much smaller incision is made and the doctor uses a magnifying lens to locate the disc. The smaller incision may reduce pain and the disruption of tissues, and it reduces the size of the surgical scar. With a laser discectomy, a laser is used to vaporize the tissue in the disc, reducing its size and relieving pressure on the nerves.

Spinal stenosis is a condition where the spinal canal narrows, compressing the nerves inside. It is often caused by bone spurs which are a result of osteoarthritis. Compression of the nerves can lead to pain, numbness in the legs and the loss of bladder or bowel control. A laminectomy may be used to open up the spinal column remove the lamina and any bone spurs. The procedure is major surgery that requires a short hospital stay and physical therapy afterwards.

Spondylolisthesis is a condition where a vertebra of the slips out of place. As the spine tries to stabilize itself, the joints between the slipped vertebra and adjacent vertebrae can become enlarged. This can pinch nerves, causing low back pain and severe sciatica leg pain. A spinal fusion may be used with a laminectomy.

In spinal fusion, two or more vertebrae are joined together using bone grafts, screws, and rods to prevent slippage of the slipped vertebrae. The bone used for the bone graft usually comes from the hip or pelvis of the patient, although a donor bone may be used. The fused area of the spine becomes immobilized.

Vertebral fractures can be caused by trauma or by osteoporosis. A vertebroplasty injects a cement-like mixture called polymethylacrylate into the fractured vertebra to stabilize the spine. Kyphoplasty inserts a balloon device to help restore the height and shape of the spine before injecting polymethylacrylate to repair the fractured vertebra.

Degenerative disc disease is an aging process where the discs between the vertebrae break down over time.

Intradiscal electrothermal therapy (IDT) involves inserting a heating wire into the disc to strengthen the collagen fibers that hold the disc together.

Spinal fusion may be used to remove the injured disc and immobilize the spine around it.

Finally, disc replacement is possible. Here the disc is simply removed and replaced with a synthetic disc.

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