

The Backache -- America's Number One Complaint

“The Backache”

America's Number One Complaint

YOUR BACK...A COMPLICATED STRUCTURE!

About 80% of all Americans will have at least one backache during their lifetime. **In fact, seven million adults will each lose ten to fifteen working days a year because of back pain of one kind or another.** Articles and books about back pain are published every year espousing old and new theories about how to treat it. However, the vast majority of backaches are often called non-specific because they have no obvious cause.

The problem is that the back is a very sophisticated, complicated structure. We can name all the joints, muscles, bones, nerves, and ligaments that make up the back, but, the sum total remains something of a mystery.

The spinal column stretches from the base of the skull to the bottom of the buttocks. It consists of 24 separate “spool” shaped bones called vertebrae, plus the sacrum (a triangular home between the hip bones) and the tail bone (coccyx.)

The vertebrae are linked and held erect by ligaments and muscles. Much of the support for the lower back comes from the muscles in the abdomen. Between the vertebrae are flexible discs that act as shock absorbers. A disc is composed of a fibrous- cartilage and acts as a cushion between the vertebrae. Each disc is constructed of a tough, fibrous outer covering wrapped around a jelly-like inner substance. It is about 80% water, but as we get older the water content falls to about 70% and the disc loses some of its ability to compress. This construction allows for some movement over the entire spinal column, but there is limited flexibility.

Finally, the spine serves as a protective conduit for the spinal cord, the vital network of nerves connecting your brain to the rest of your body. The spinal cord runs the length of the spinal column. There are also narrow side channels through which peripheral nerves pass on their way to and from the rest of the body. Thus, any problems with a vertebrae, supporting ligament, or disc may affect a far-reaching part of the nervous system. As a result, a back problem might lead to symptoms such as pain or weakness in any part of the body.

Back pain is so common because the human spine hasn't evolved to the point where we can walk upright without some risk. Being erect puts extra pressure on the vertebrae of the lower back, or lumbar region, where the back curves most and where pain most often strikes. The lumbar region must support the weight of our entire upper body and bears most of the load when we work, and therefore is one of the most common areas for pain.

Backache becomes common between the ages of 30 to 50 years as the discs start to lose water and elasticity, and some of their ability to absorb shock. Also, in middle age, people tend to become less active and their muscles are more lax contributing to back instability.

Most non-specific backaches are due to a strained ligament or vertebral joint that causes surrounding muscles to go into spasm. The term strain is generally used when a muscle is over stretched, and sprain is used when a ligament is torn. However, it is hard for you to tell whether it's a muscle or a ligament that has been damaged, or whether it has been torn or not. All you can feel is the pain (which can range from mild discomfort to excruciating.)

Muscle spasm is a sudden onset of sustained, painful, involuntary contractions of the muscles. This may be the back's way of immobilizing irritated muscles, thereby protecting them and spinal nerves. A spasm usually results from a back injury, but may also be caused or aggravated by poor posture, sitting in the same position

The Backache -- America's Number One Complaint

for hours at a time, tense back muscles, and weak abdominal muscles.

In other cases, pain is due to fibrositis which is a term for stiffness and pain felt deep within the muscles. Its causes range from straining a muscle or a joint to emotional tension reflected in the knotting up of muscular tissues. If you have an attack of fibrositis, there is nothing basically wrong with the muscles themselves, but you are likely to have sharply localized pain, and may even have slight swellings within the affected area. Fibrositis is a common disorder and usually clears up within three or four days.

Another common cause of non-specific "backache" is stress. Some people develop backaches. Stress has also been not only linked to muscle spasm, but is thought by some to be a major cause of back pain.

Backaches of all kinds are a major health problem. Although non-specific backache is often very painful and may make it difficult for you to continue your daily routine, there is virtually no risk of complications. Such backaches generally heal without treatment, but unfortunately they tend to recur. It is always best not to take any backache for granted, and if you suffer from severe pain make certain that you get professional attention.

The great majority of backaches (less serious strains, sprains, or spasms) usually don't require a doctor's attention. For soreness and minor back pain avoiding physically demanding activity may be sufficient. But in cases where the pain is more severe, you should follow your first instinct – lie down. This is good for two reasons. First, you relieve the pain and allow the damaged tissue to repair itself. Second, you take mechanical pressure off your stressed or injured back.

According to a recent study, reclining as compared to standing reduces pressure on the lumbar discs by 70% while unsupported sitting increases it by over 40%.

Bed rest is important, but don't overdo it. The current trend in treating common backaches is to get people out of bed as soon as they can get up comfortably. Long bed rests may actually lead to further back injury by weakening the muscles.

After any backache, it is important to remember to resume your normal activities gradually. Your back will need plenty of time to heal completely once the pain is gone. You will need to take it easy for a week, and avoid heavy chores and sports for at least two weeks.

Common sense and a careful approach to lifting, posture, and the way you sit can go a long way in preventing back problems. Practice good posture until it becomes automatic for you, and it will pay you big dividends!

Backaches Caused By Underlying Diseases, Structural Problems, or Disc Problems

Disc Problems:

Disc problems are relatively common. This is what people commonly refer to as a "slipped" disc. The term "slipped" is incorrect since the disc actually bulges from between two vertebrae and may eventually rupture (or herniated.) If a displaced disc presses on a spinal nerve, the nerve can send shooting sharp pain to the legs or arms, or create a tingling or numbed sensation in them.

Underlying Disease and Structural Problems:

A small percentage of all backaches are related to known medical problems, such as kidney disease, cancer, arthritis, osteoporosis, or spinal infection, scoliosis (side-way curvature), lordosis (sway back, or excessive curve in the lower spine), or other structural defects may also be at the root of the problem.

Call your doctor if you have one or more of the following symptoms: radiating pain; numbness or tingling in an arm or leg; back pain that continues unabated when you're lying down; back pain that persists for more

The Backache -- America's Number One Complaint

than three or four days of resting; back pain as a direct result of a fall or car accident; vomiting or fever associated with back pain; or a backache in an elderly person or child. *Any of these symptoms may indicate a more serious problem.*



Information Provided By:

Yonemoto Physical Therapy Services, INC.
55 S. Raymond Ave., Suite 100
Alhambra, CA 91801
626-576-0591
www.yonemoto.com