

## **Chronic Back Pain: Where Do We Stand?**

It is common knowledge that most Americans will experience back pain at some time in their life. In fact the odds are eight out of ten Americans will have symptoms of back pain. It is the opinion of this author that the ratio is actually higher than 80%. A researcher recently reported that from 1992 through 2006 the prevalence of chronic, impairing back pain increased from 3.9 to 10.2 percent! Back pain is the number one reason Americans lose work time. Yikes! That's a lot of back pain. The good news is that most cases of back pain are relatively easy to manage. Non-invasive treatments such as moist heat, electrical stimulation, ultrasound, over the counter pain medications, massage and light exercise are often all that is necessary to address this condition. Most practitioners agree that nonspecific back pain can and should be managed relatively conservatively at first. Trouble starts when the condition becomes chronic, or in cases where there is confirmed disc pathology. When things become complicated, opinions heat up.

When someone is dealing with chronic back pain they are willing to try almost anything to relieve themselves of the symptoms. There are any number of gadgets on the market that claim that they will be the answer to your condition. There are those clinicians who want you to believe that their method is the only method to cure your symptoms. You just have to show your commitment to their program. Just commit to your regular adjustments once a week forever and you will be cured. Or for \$3000 you can have unlimited spinal decompression sessions; Vax-D, Spinal decompression, Inversion Tables, etc. the list goes on and on. Most often people are looking for that quick fix. They will try all sorts of medications and painful injections. The problem with this approach is that medications and injections do not solve the cause of the pain. They simply cover up the symptoms. This leads to a false sense of security. Because the pain is lessened temporarily people think that they are better so they try to go back to all of their pre-pain activities. They forget that the underlying problem remains. As a result they often do more damage to the injured area. This only makes the problem worse. In addition to this medications and injections frequently have side effects. Unfortunately, when you are in pain you are often willing to ignore the potentially serious side effects that accompany most medications.

In my clinical practice I have found that the most effective treatments are the most simple. This concept has become lost in a world of fancy gidgets and gadgets that simply don't work. The message gets lost from clinicians who want you to become dependent on them rather than having them help you become independent in your own health care.

One of the most important ideas to keep in mind when dealing with your back pain is that you must use common sense. Granted, no one expects you to be a medical professional. In the same manner you should not expect that from yourself. One of the mistakes I see people making is that they try to diagnose themselves. "I know I have a disc injury. I had an MRI years ago and it showed I had a bulging disc." This may be true but it is not correct that simply because there is a history of a disc injury that this herniation/bulge is the cause of your symptoms right now. So, jumping to conclusions is one of the most

common mistakes I see people making. As a result, their home grown methods of treatment often fail and their condition gets worse. So what is a person to do?

First, don't try to diagnose yourself. Seek out the proper medical attention. Your family doctor is a fine first step. If you don't have a primary care physician then find one. Next, see a physical therapist for an evaluation. Physical therapists are experts when it comes to evaluating the biomechanics of the human body and evaluating both normal and abnormal movement. In this capacity the physical therapist you your partner along with your physician to properly evaluate the cause of your back pain and develop a treatment method that is best for you. A physical therapist can not only determine the root cause for your pain but then develop a treatment program designed to correct the problem, without medication/injections! The one main problem with medications and injections is that these treatment procedures do not address the cause of the pain. They only address the symptoms. The pharmaceutical companies are happy to treat your symptoms for the rest of your life. In fact, they may not ever want you to treat the primary cause of the symptoms. If you cured the cause then their drugs would be of no benefit to you and that's not very good for their bottom line. Not all cases of back pain are the same. They should not all be treated that same.

So how does physical therapy address your symptoms of chronic back pain? First a therapist will look at your posture and how your body moves. This assessment tells a story. A therapist can often identify the root cause of your condition by performing an in-depth clinical examination. A skilled therapist will be able to identify imbalance in muscle strength and flexibility. The clinical exam will also be able to uncover areas of nerve compression and tissue damage. Once this is accomplished, the therapist along with the patient will discuss the reasonable goals that a patient can expect to achieve through a course of therapy. The therapist will develop a plan to address each patient's specific condition and address the root cause of the pain and not just the symptoms. In this manner the main cause of the pain is addressed and a long term solution is achieved. It is human nature to want to alleviate pain as quickly as possible. That said, there is a time and a place for pain medications. The simple answer is that pain medication is a means to an end not the end themselves. The pain medications allow the patient to take part in an active physical therapy program so that the underlying problem can be fixed. One of the main objectives of a skilled physical therapy program is to live a pain-free life without the dependence on medications, ongoing injections and never ending manipulations.

I hope that this short article on back pain has been helpful to you. In the near future we will be holding a Back School where we can continue to educate people on the proper way to address their specific condition. Remember, not all back pain is from the same cause so not all conditions can be treated the same way. Finally, a health care practitioner should help you promote independence. They should help you find ways to manage your condition rather than make you dependent on them. So, seek good advice and when you find it pass it on to someone else who can benefit from this advice as well.