

The Many Effects of Low Back Pain

One of the major problems confronting society today is chronic back pain. When symptoms last seven weeks or more, then the condition is considered chronic. Chronic low back pain is the number one cause of disability in the working population. Recovery to pre-injury status for chronic low back pain diminishes with the passage of time. The socioeconomic impact of chronic pain is enormous. In a given year, an estimated one in five American adults has chronic pain. All told, chronic pain costs the nation at least \$80 billion annually.

Low back pain, resulting in prolonged disability, is the most prevalent and costly work-related problem in industry. Yet despite its prevalence, up to 85% of low back pain has no definite cause.

Most of these patients have had extensive testing including MRI's or CAT scans looking for a disc protrusion or tear that would explain the chronic pain they are experiencing. In most cases, these tests only reveal aging of the spine. There are many theories, but no supporting data to prove them.

A recent paper addressed what happens to patients with acute spinal pain. It reported that after 3 months, only approximately 27% of patients were completely better, 28% of the patients were improved, 30% had no change, and 14% were worse or much worse. That is 44% of those with low back injuries were the same or worse. One of the major problems is that many practitioners take only one aspect of the problem into account when planning a treatment program. Back pain has many causes and is usually multifactorial.

A general population study showed that increased risk for non-specific low back pain was related to a history of prior back injury, occupational physical stress, mental stress and smoking. Smoking is a factor because it alters the circulation to the spinal structures, decreasing the healing rates. It is now thought that changes in circulation to the spine are root causes of degeneration of the discs and ligaments.

We have to take into account many factors not only in the cause but also in the treatment of this condition. The successful treatment of chronic back pain usually involves therapies to multiple tissues. The muscles in the area of injury will show changes; some may be weak and not supporting you properly, while others are shortened or over contracting. The ligaments that bind your bones together can be short, overly tight, or weak and flaccid. The fascia, the shiny covering that covers the muscles, can be tighter than normal and require treatment. The individual bones and joints can be misaligned or locked up, irritating different types of nerves causing pain, ache and reflex muscle spasm. In addition, you may have inflammation in the area due to tissue damage.

We are like a house in some ways. We need a stable base. The walls should be straight and the roof should be on level. When the base or foundation of the house sinks, the walls become crooked, the windows don't open right, and the roof changes and leaks. Most chronic back pain begins with a change in our foundation. The proper alignment and functioning of our pelvis and lower spine are critical to form the base for proper spinal function.

It used to be thought that bed rest was the most important factor in treating back pain. "Take a pain killer and go to bed". Over the last few years, the importance of motion has been discovered. Movement allows more normal healing of the injured structures, and increases the circulation into and out of the areas that have been damaged. Consequently, one of the first goals is to get you moving properly. That means walking and standing without pain or ache.

There are two general rules for determining when a patient should be seen for any nagging ache that they are having:

1. Your symptoms don't go away after three to four days
2. The pain or ache keeps you from doing everyday activities

It's that simple. Early treatment is fast and effective. The longer the time from injury to initiation of treatment, the more chronic and difficult the condition is to treat. The potential is there for a degree of permanent disability to occur.

Steps to prevent back pain

- Exercise regularly to keep back muscles strong and flexible
- The exercise should include some stretching.
- Use the correct lifting techniques (lift all objects close to your body and avoid twisting, bending forward, or reaching while lifting)
- Maintain proper body weight and avoid smoking
- Maintain proper posture when standing or sitting (straight back, ears over shoulders, shoulders rounded back)

Back Pain and Sleep

Back pain not only affects our ability to function normally at home and at work, but also alters our normal sleep.

One study estimated that over 56 million adults in the United States experience nighttime pain that causes difficulty sleeping. According to a Gallup survey, these sleeping difficulties occur an average of 8.5 nights a month, with approximately 2.4 hours of sleep lost each night.

Respondents with nighttime pain and sleep impairment rate themselves lower in their general moods, physical health, ability to handle stress, and ability to "get up and go" each day as compared to those without sleep impairment.

Among adults who say their pain contributes to sleeping difficulties, almost 80% report that they have trouble falling asleep. Well over 50% of people say they have been awakened by pain during the night. Most report sleeping an average of 7 hours on pain-free nights, but sleep only 4.6 hours on nights when they have pain.

Most people think that if they just lie down their back pain will go away. This happens with some problems, but as you can see from above, too many people have their rest disturbed by back pain.

Testing you in the positions that you sleep may help uncover the cause of your restless sleep. After correcting all of the structural problems in your spine, we must consider your sleeping conditions. This includes your mattress and your pillow.

If your mattress is too soft, but is in good condition, you might be able to save the cost of a new mattress by placing a board under your old one. Put the board between the springs and the mattress. If your mattress is too firm, you can make it more comfortable by covering it with a foam mattress. If your mattress is getting a bit lumpy, you can prolong its life by turning it over. In fact, you should turn your mattress every six months or so.