

Myths and Misconceptions About Back Pain

While sometimes easy to diagnose and treat, back pain can also be very complex. The source of the pain can be due to single or multiple causes. Consequently, it can be difficult to diagnose and treat each cause of the pain. Each pain source has a wide variety of treatment options that must be considered. Your treatment for back pain may be totally different from another person.

There are many structures in the lower back that can cause severe pain. These include: muscles, ligaments, tendons, bones, joints and discs. The outer rim of the disc can be a source of significant back pain, due to its rich nerve supply and tendency towards injury.

During our development, there is a great deal of overlap of nerve supply to all of these structures. This makes it nearly impossible for the brain to distinguish between injury of one structure versus another. For example, a torn or herniated disc can feel identical to a bruised muscle or ligament injury. This is where an examination into the cause of the pain is important, because each of these different structures may need a different type of treatment to resolve your pain.

There are common myths and misconceptions about back pain. This article is designed to “set the record straight.”

First – “It will never happen to me!”

Statistics show that approximately eight out of ten people will experience back pain at some point in their lifetime. Back pain is the leading cause of disability in men over 45 years old. It is also the second most common reason for a visit to a primary care doctor. Back pain is the third most frequent reason for surgery, and the fifth most frequent cause of hospitalization. Back pain occurs in children as well as adults. As we age and become more inflexible, we lose some of our muscle support, and the incidence of back pain increases. One of the major areas of pain in almost all sports is the back. From professional football, baseball, basketball and soccer, to sports like gymnastics, swimming and even professional ballroom dancing, back pain is a common factor to deal with.

Second – “I am in great shape, so I will never get back pain!”

Individuals that exercise and take care of themselves are less likely to have back pain than a couch potato. However, back pain can affect all people regardless of the level of their activity. For example, some sports like golf and running are well known for causing back pain. That doesn't mean you should avoid sports like these. What it means is that you should take your back conditioning into consideration. This conditioning should involve your posture, flexibility and strength. Your pelvis and spine need to create a stable platform from which the

arms and legs work. The muscles of posture, those that hold us erect, have a tendency to weaken with age. This is part of the reason we lose vertical height. As these muscles become weaker, greater stress is applied to the ligaments and other structures of the back. When these muscles are weak, activities like vacuuming, shoveling, getting groceries out of the car or just bending over the sink become painful.

Third – “My pain is so bad that I know I need surgery!”

The severity of pain from lower back injuries is often unrelated to the extent of physical damage present. Muscle spasm from a simple back strain can cause excruciating back pain that can limit one’s ability to walk or even stand, whereas a large herniated disc can be completely painless.

With acute pain, the level of pain correlates to the level of damage (e.g. if you touch a hot iron, you will immediately feel a great deal of pain). However, with chronic pain (greater than 6 weeks) the amount of back pain does not typically correlate with the amount of damage.

Back injuries are a common cause of disability. And even though back pain is rarely life threatening, the annual cost in terms of lost productivity, medical expenses and workers' compensation benefits runs into the tens of billions of dollars annually in the United States.

In the office, we are interested in not only finding the cause of your back pain, but also helping you to develop good preventative measures to ward off your next bout with this problem. If 80% of Americans have problems with their back, don’t be surprised if you are one of them. Work with us to help you develop good patterns of stretching, exercise and posture to minimize your chances of another “attack”.