

Types of Back Pain

There are three main types of back pain: mechanical, referred, and radicular. All three may have similar presentations, but it is important to distinguish between them. Treatment options may sometimes overlap for each type; stabilization of surrounding structures is critical no matter what the type of pain.

Types of back pain

The most common type is known as axial or *mechanical back pain*. The pain can run the gamut from very sharp to a dull ache. It may occur all the time or come and go. It also varies in intensity from very mild to extremely severe. One patient may say that their low back is only sore when they have been sitting for a time or if they work in the garden. Another patient will have severe debilitating pain and need assistance to even walk or stand from a sitting position. While one patient will be perfectly straight, another will be bent over and locked in a crooked posture. Pain is usually localized to the lower back area.

Mechanical back pain is completely non-specific with regards to the injured structure or structures. Generally, the pain gets worse with certain activities or positions. The pain is usually relieved by rest or moving into a specific position. Usually you will feel better after you have been lying down for a while, but staying in bed too long can also aggravate this type of problem.

This type of problem responds extremely well to conservative care. At times, spinal manipulation alone is like a miracle and the person feels immediately relief. More often, the injury involves more than just a misalignment of a vertebra or of your pelvis. Nerves, muscles, tendons, ligaments and skin can all have an influence on the degree of discomfort that you have. Each of these may need to be addressed to attain relief. If you have multiple episodes of this type of pain, you will want to engage yourself in a rehabilitation program to help resolve the underlying causes of the problem. Here, the diagnosis goes farther than just finding out what is causing the pain, and additionally centers on what weakness or restriction you have that ultimately causes the back pain episode. Here, we function more like a coach. We have to find the cause or causes and help direct you into ways to avoid and limit future episodes.

The next most common type of back pain is known as *referred pain*. Here, the person complains of having an achy, dull type pain that moves around. The discomfort comes and goes and varies in intensity. This achy pain starts in the low back area and commonly spreads into the groin, buttock and upper thigh. More investigation is necessary with referred pain, as there may be a problem with the internal organs or other structures surrounding the spine.

The last type of back pain is known as *radicular pain*. In this case, the pain is described as deep and usually constant. It follows the nerve down the leg and is often accompanied by numbness or tingling and muscle weakness.

The most common example of this type of problem is the sciatic pain that radiates along the sciatic nerve - down the back of the thigh and calf into the foot. This type of pain is caused by injury to a spinal nerve. Some of the possible causes of this are a disc protrusion, or bulge, arthritic changes, or a narrowing of the opening that the nerve exits through.

Treatment

While a few of these cases will require surgery, most respond to conservative care. Here the care will consist of a multiple of therapies all designed to reduce inflammation, balance your posture, strengthen supporting structures, attain normal motion and improve the health of the nerve that is involved.

In all of these types of back pain, your health habits play an important part. For example, there are certain foods that are high in the fats that cause more inflammation. Limiting the intake of these animal fats and increasing your intake of the good fats that reduce inflammation may play an important role in your healing. Smoking is another health concern. Statistically, smokers are slow healers when it comes to back pain.

One of the most important areas in chronic back pain management is the strengthening of your core musculature- these muscles provide a “sling” to support the pelvis and spine. The core muscles include the abdominal wall, the pelvic floor, the lower back muscles, and the diaphragm. Weakness of these structures cause your back muscles to tighten and shorten. This adversely affects the lower back by causing compressive forces on the small joints and the discs.

If you are interested in helping to prevent or at least limit your chances of having any of these three types of back pain, talk to us about testing and setting up an exercise program for maintaining good support for your back.