

# Oh, My Aching Back!

Everyone gets back pain once in a while, and a few of us can have back pain that is long lasting or permanent and much more serious. Back pain is extremely common in our society. In fact, at least 80% of adults in the United States will encounter some form of back pain in their lifetimes. Back pain is the second most common reason people visit their family doctors (just after upper respiratory infections). On any given day, almost two percent of the entire United States workforce is disabled by back pain.

There are many reasons why so many people experience back pain, including poor posture over time, poor body mechanics, being overweight, putting excessive strain on the spine, smoking, eating a poor diet, as well as spinal diseases and other health conditions. However, the most common cause of back pain in our country is simply aging.

The spine is made up of a column of 33 bones called vertebrae, which provide support for the body. In between each vertebra is a disc that gives the spine flexibility and serves as a shock absorber for the body. The spine extends from the skull to the pelvis. Together, the vertebrae and the discs provide a protective tunnel (called the spinal canal) through which the spinal cord and spinal nerves pass through. The sections of the spine are:

- \*Cervical vertebrae are the seven vertebrae forming the upper part of the spine
- \*Thoracic vertebrae are the 12 bones between the neck and the lower back
- \*Lumbar vertebrae are the five largest and strongest vertebrae and are located in the lower back between the chest and the hips
- \*The sacrum and coccyx are the bones at the base of the spine. The sacrum is made up of five vertebrae fused together, while the coccyx (tailbone) is formed from four fused vertebrae.

There is a huge array of painful conditions affecting the back and spine but back strain is the leading cause (estimated as high as 85%). It is most often the direct result of an injury or the indirect consequence of the degenerative process of aging. Simply said...time begins to take its toll on our bodies and we begin to wear out! Gravity, previous abuse to our bodies and constant pressure on the spine all contribute to compressed discs which can certainly lead to back problems as we age.

Some back aches come on suddenly and some over an extended period of time. But with a little more understanding of preventive measures, making a few changes to our lifestyles (appropriate exercise is usually number one) you can reduce the probability of back injuries and back aches. However, it is also helpful to separate misconceptions from facts.

## **Myth #1: Lifting heavy objects will strain your back**

Most injuries are caused not by what you pick up, but how you do it. The proper form: squat, keeping your back straight is highly recommended. Grab the object, bring it close to your body, then stand; your thigh and butt muscles should do the actual lifting. Even just grabbing a pen off the floor can be bad if done wrong. One of the worst moves is bending over to the side when staying seated with your feet planted on the floor. Twisting your back in two directions at once may strain the discs than cushion your spinal vertebrae.

## **Myth #2: Sitting up straight keeps your spine in line.**

While your mother was right to stop you from hunching, holding yourself too erectly isn't as good for your back as you think. Actually it puts a lot of stress on your discs, especially when you do it for long periods of time. In fact, researchers found that people who sat at a 90 degree angle strained their spines more than those who reclined at 135 degrees. What may be just as important as sitting correctly is movement alternating with sitting. To boost circulation in your back muscles and lessen fatigue, stand up every half hour and take a five minute stroll or stretch every hour.

**Myth #3: Most exercise is hard on your back.**

Orthopedic research has found that working out at least three times a week actually reduces the risk of developing chronic back pain by at least 40%. Exercise strengthens your back muscles and keeps your waistline in check which is a huge payoff for your back. Overweight people are nearly three times as likely to go to the hospital with a back injury as those of a healthy weight. Opt for low-impact aerobic exercise, such as walking or swimming.

**Myth#4: A superfirm mattress is best for your back.**

Actually, it could be the source of your pain. Trying to find a back-friendly bed is like playing Goldilocks: a too soft mattress doesn't offer enough support, while a rock-hard one can increase pressure on the spine. A medium-firm mattress is generally best but ask your doctor if you have specific medical problems that should be considered.

Are you interested in learning more about preventing back pain and spinal degeneration and the importance of spinal maintenance? Would you like to learn stretching techniques, proper spinal biomechanics, and strengthening exercises? The topic for the Tuesday, May 26<sup>th</sup> 11:30am-1:00 pm "Bits and Bites" meeting (a bit of information and a bit to eat) of the Delta College 50+...Just Like Gold program by Dr. Jinny Sirard will focus on our backs. Lunch is included and only costs \$4.00 for 50+ members or \$10.00 for non members. If you are interested in attending this luncheon or in becoming a member please call the Delta College LifeLong Learning Office at (989)686-9364 or from the Midland area call 495-4000, ext. 9364.

With all our knowledge and treatment options available today, it is no longer necessary to accept back pain as just a normal part of the aging process. Be active, be healthy, continue learning, and enjoy life!

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