

LOW BACK PAIN

During this time of year, most people equate a doctor visit with the "flu." However, another main reason for physician office visits is lower back pain, which plagues nearly 80% of Americans at some point during their lifetime. Almost everyone who experiences an episode of low back pain will suffer another occurrence, and lower back pain is one of the costliest medical problems in America.

Fortunately, few people suffering from low back pain have serious medical problems. Most cases resolve within a few weeks and only a small percentage of people develop chronic back problems. Still, lower back pain should be taken seriously. A physician should evaluate pain that develops due to no apparent event, is not easily relieved by rest, follows a traumatic incident such as a car accident or fall, accompanies incontinence and/or loss of leg muscle function, or occurs in children and adolescents.

Lower back pain may present in many different ways, depending on the cause of the symptoms. Pain may be central or off to one side of the back. Some people may experience pain, numbness, or tingling in one or both legs. Problems involving muscles, joints, degenerative processes, discs, nerves, and organs may all give rise to the symptoms of low back pain. Even various hip and leg disorders may be mistaken for spinal pain.

The best treatment for lower back pain is preventing it in the first place, a notion much easier said than done. Maintaining proper posture minimizes the muscular stress on the spine and often alleviates or halts the progression of lower back pain. Though simple, attaining excellent posture is often complicated by a lack of awareness of poor posture. A supportive chair or lumbar roll helps to maintain the normal "C" curve of the lumbar spine.

Physical conditioning and proper body mechanics also play a pivotal role in protecting the back, especially those with physically demanding jobs. Frequently, injuries result when the physical demands placed on the body exceed its physical abilities. Volumes of scientific evidence suggest that exercise and increased overall fitness level reduce the risk of developing back pain and speed the resolution of back pain if it begins. Excellent body mechanics manage the load and strain on the lower back through positioning. Lifting even a small weight far away from the body or in a twisting motion may cause injury. Keeping the back straight, bending at the knees and holding objects close to your body is the key to proper mechanics.

Smoking may even be a risk factor for developing low back pain. Because of the limited blood supply in the tissues of the low back, smoking speeds the degenerative process and impairs healing. Add this to the already lengthy list of reasons to quit!

Rehabilitation plays a pivotal role not only in the treatment of the symptoms of lower back pain, but in the prevention of recurrence as well. People with back pain often limit their activities. As a result of pain and inactivity, muscles become weak and deconditioned, resulting in suboptimal back functioning. Treatments are designed to ease pain and to improve mobility, strength, posture, and function. Patients also learn how to control their symptoms and protect their spine in the years ahead.