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"treating the cause of your problem, not just the symptoms"

Keep That Back Limber

As a chiropractor, most of the people that come to see me have some form of low back pain, upper back pain, neck pain, or headaches. The most common by far is low back pain. To most patients' surprise and delight, the low back pain is rarely due a "herniated" or "slipped" disk. This is when the round little cushion of ligament material between the vertebrae of the spine is seriously damaged. I will cover this topic at a later date. The more common source of low back pain originates from the joints, muscles, and nerves.

The simplest term to describe this type of low back pain is "Vertebrogenic", which means the pain is "generated from the vertebrae" of the spine. The Chiropractic profession has made leaps and bounds in the area of research on this topic. It is something chiropractors are very familiar with and they are likely treating more patients with it than any other health care practitioner. This type of back pain affects those of you who have an occupation that requires long periods of sitting or standing. It is also likely that you do not participate in a regular exercise and stretching routine. Carrying extra body weight will further put you at risk. The low back, called the "lumbar spine", is normally a fairly flexible structure. It is made up of five vertebrae that have two small joints between each of them. These joints allow your low back to bend forwards and backwards, as well as a smaller amount of rotation. When the muscles of this region have good flexibility and the joints have a normal potential range of motion, the back will remain healthy and pain-free. When the back is repetitively abused, even lightly, the joints become stiff and the muscles tighten. This is a recipe for disaster. Disaster may sound like a slight exaggeration, but just ask someone who has had a severe bout of back pain how serious of a problem he or she thought it was.

To explain how this back pain arises, I will break it down into three parts.

- 1) At a younger age, we are much more active. Our joints are healthier, we have no arthritis, and our muscles are very limber. If we hurt our back, it will heal very quickly with minimal treatment.

- 2) As we age and enter the work force, we have less time to “play” and we spend more time at work and doing other activities that are not considered exercise. Our back muscles become a little tighter and the joints do not have the full movement that they used to. People at this stage usually wake up stiff in the morning and cannot sit or stand without getting a tight lower back. There may not be any real pain involved, but there is a problem already started. The average age of these people is thirty to sixty years old.
- 3) The third stage is generally when they come to see me. They have gone out and done some form of physical activity that required more flexibility in the muscles and a greater range of motion than they could produce. For example, your back was able to bend a total of sixty degrees when it was very healthy, but now it is stiff and can only bend forty-five degrees. This does not cause you any real pain on a day to day basis, only stiffness when you get out of bed in the morning. Then one day you reach down to put your sock on and attempt to make our back bend beyond the forty-five degrees. Suddenly you feel a sharp pain in the lower back and you drop to the floor.

It is at this point that the joints in the lower back become swollen and inflamed. This will eventually irritate the nerves of the low back that exit the spine right next to the joints. The nerves become hyperactive and stimulate the muscles to tighten causing painful muscle spasms.

There are different treatments for low back pain depending on what health care practitioner you see. Regardless of whom you see and how they treat it, the most important thing you must do is to restore that lost muscle flexibility and joint mobility. Without doing this, the pain will last longer and even if it does eventually go away, you are just as prone for it to return. In a Chiropractic setting, they will immediately address the lack of joint mobility. When a sore joint has its proper mobility restored, the patient can become more active. Even just light walking around the house is good. When the back is moving, your body is able to remove the swelling and heal the joint faster. This is why the old theory of bedrest for back pain just doesn't work. It may even prolong the suffering. Again, you must remember that only your body can “heal” an injured back. Chiropractors and other Health Care Practitioners should only be trying to help that process along.

To prevent your back from tightening in the first place, walk at brisk pace for at least twenty minutes per day and do the simple stretch that I have included before and after the walk. Many people also visit their Chiropractor to have their low back “manipulated” so that the joints maintain good mobility.