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

Your Back Pain and Your Hamstrings

Each week we see hundreds of patients in our office with low back pain. As chiropractors, we are very interested in figuring out what is causing the back problem rather than just relieving the symptoms. If there is an underlying problem with the patient that is making the person prone to becoming sore, we want to find out what it is.

One common underlying cause of chronic low back pain is when you have tight hamstrings. These are the muscles at the back of your upper leg. They reach from the bottom and back of your pelvis down to the back of your leg, just below the knee. When you bend forward, two areas of your body do most of the movement. First, the pelvis pivots at the hip joints and it tips forward. Secondly, the low back (or lumbar spine) flexes or bends forward.

These two actions combined allow us to easily reach down to pick up an object off the ground. A problem arises when your body is not able to do one or both of these actions. Because the hamstrings attach to the back of the pelvis, they must stretch or lengthen as the pelvis tips. If your hamstrings are tight and will not stretch, the pelvis cannot tip. Then, the low back is forced to compensate for this and bend forward even further. You will still be able to reach the object on the ground but now the lower back is being overstressed. If the object is heavy or you have to bend over repetitively, the low back will eventually become sore. If this repetitive stress on the lower back is maintained over a long period of time, arthritis will eventually occur.

A specific example that I saw in my office was a fifty-year-old logging truck driver who had strong muscles in his back and legs but their flexibility was very poor. He experienced several bouts of low back pain every year. We were able to eliminate his symptoms each time but he could not be bothered to stretch his muscles when he was not in pain. Finally, while frustrated from his most recent bout of back pain, we convinced him to follow a simple stretching routine. To his surprise, he did not experience any further bouts of pain as long as he was faithful to his stretching routine. He is a classic case of tight hamstrings making his low back compensate and work too hard. This inevitably caused his low back to become sore.

Next week I will describe a few simple stretching exercises for the hips and hamstrings. If these are done faithfully, it will allow you to bend and lift objects with less risk of injuring your low back. Remember that one week after an article is published, it will be available for viewing and printing on our website: www.merrittchiro.com

