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

Exercises You Should Not Do

It is very rare that I would encourage someone to not exercise. However, there are certain exercises or stretches that may pose more of a risk than a benefit. For example, I had an adult male in my office this week that had extreme low back pain. What upset him almost as much as the pain was the fact that he "didn't do anything to deserve such an injury". He described to me his daily ritual of doing an exercise routine that his physical education teacher taught him twenty years ago. It consisted of many exercises, four of which were: bending over to reach his toes from a standing position, moving his lower back forward/sideways/backwards in a rotational pattern while standing, moving his head in a forward/sideways/and backward rotational pattern, and full sit-ups.

Many of the exercises we were taught twenty years ago have now been proven to potentially cause injury in vulnerable people. The four exercises I described above that this gentleman was doing are perfect examples. When he bent over from a standing position to reach his toes and stretch the back of his legs (hamstrings) and lower back, the entire weight of his upper body was being held in a vulnerable position by the joints and muscles of the lower back. If the joints in his lower back were already previously stiff or their mobility was restricted, forcing them to move farther than they can comfortably go can injure them. In fact, this is exactly what happened to this gentleman. He felt that his back was slightly stiff and he therefore decided to stretch it by reaching for his toes. He did not have the potential mobility in his lower back joints to accomplish this. It was then that he experienced the onset of sharp pain in that region. For the same reason, rotating his upper body in a circular pattern in order to stretch his back will repetitively compress and stretch open the joints in his lower back. Because he did this exercise while standing, the weight of his upper body also applied a compressive force to the same joints. Particularly in the spine, rotational and bending motions combined with compressive forces can seriously irritate the joints. They can become inflamed and restricted in their movement. If severe enough, the neighboring nerves can become irritated. These nerves control the muscles along the spine and can be responsible for very painful muscle spasms. This is why doing a similar rotational movement with your head, particularly at the point when your neck is bent all the way backwards, can also cause acute joint inflammation, nerve irritation, and muscle spasm of the neck. As well, when this gentleman did his sit-ups, he raised his upper body all the way up to touch his

knees. Not only does this technique not isolate the abdominal muscles well, it can also put pressure on the low back and neck if the exercise is not done a very specific way.

If you want to stretch the back of your legs (hamstrings) and lower back without putting your lower back at risk, lie down on the floor with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Then raise one leg only and slowly straighten the knee slowly. You should feel a tightening sensation at the back of that leg. Hold for ten seconds and then do the same for the other side.

To stretch your lower back in safe rotational manner, lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Then, straighten out one leg and leave it on the floor. If it is your right knee that is still bent, use your left hand and pull the right knee so that your lower body rotates to the left. Your shoulders must stay flat on the floor. Hold this stretch for ten seconds and then repeat on the opposite side.

Instead of doing rotational movements with the neck, it is safer to do static stretches to the left, right, and forward. Instead of doing full sit-ups, a much safer technique is to do “crunches” and only lift your shoulders a few inches off the floor. Because I do not have the space in this article to demonstrate each of these, I have put them in the “free stretches and exercises” section of our website (www.merrittchiro.com) for you to view and/or print if you desire.

There are all types of safe exercises you can do for almost any region of the body. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to call or email me at “drgage@telus.net”.