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

Be Careful When Shoveling Snow!

So far, we have only had two significant snowfalls this year. In both cases, the snow was wet and heavy. This created quite a potential problem for the many people who had to shovel it. By the next day, many of these same people hobbled into our office desperately seeking relief from their low back pain. To explain how this happens and why it can affect almost anyone, I will give you an example of a gentleman who came to see me on Monday after shoveling snow the day before.

As I am sure you are aware, heavy and wet snow fell most of last Sunday. This gentleman thought that he would just wait for it to finish coming down before he began shoveling. Although this meant that he only had to clear his driveway one time, it also meant that he had to shovel the total accumulation of snow all at once. Because he did not normally experience any serious back pain and was a fairly healthy guy, he felt that clearing his snow-covered driveway would be a simple task. By late afternoon, the snow had stopped falling and he dug out his winter boots, gloves, and jacket from the closet. However, when he bent over to put on his boots, he felt a mild stiffness in his low back. He did not even give it a second thought since he had been feeling this mild tension in his lower back off and on to no avail for the past two weeks. As he shoveled, his lower back felt like it was loosening up and the tension soon disappeared. After questioning him on Monday, he was even rather careless about how he shoveled. Instead of pushing the snow in front of him while keeping his low back straight, he was scooped up the wet snow, rotated his body, and threw it aside. This technique not only caused him to twist his back repetitively, but it also put excessive stress on the joints and muscles of that region. After the driveway was all done, he retired to his lazy boy chair (beer in hand) for a well-deserved short rest that ended up being a prolonged nap. When he woke up, he noted a burning sensation in his low back (as well as his bladder being full from the beer he drank). He attempted to sit up but felt immediate acute pain in his low back. He soon realized that even getting out of that chair was not going to be an easy task. Whenever he moved, he experienced waves of acutely painful muscle spasms.

When the gentleman finally came to see me the next day, he was fairly distraught. The medication he had taken did not work and he was unable to sleep all night. After asking numerous questions and completing a thorough chiropractic examination, it was apparent that his problem was in the “facet joints” located between the “lumbar” vertebrae at the lowermost portion of his spine. The mild low back stiffness he had been experiencing over the last two weeks told me that he likely already had a reduced range of motion in that area long before he started shoveling snow. This made his back vulnerable to injury when he attempted repetitive twisting and lifting motions. As a result, inflammation accumulated in and around the joints and nerves of his low back. Not only did this make the joints very sore and stiff, but the inflammation also chemically irritates the large “spinal nerves” as they pass between the vertebrae. These nerves are responsible for controlling pain sensation and the contraction of the large muscles in his low back. Whenever they are irritated or pinched, the nerves create acute sensations of pain and make the muscles of the low back go into a forceful contraction or spasm.

To summarize, the “facet joints” in his lower back were acutely inflamed and very restricted in their movement. As well, the neighboring “spinal nerves” were severely irritated, which resulted in severe pain and muscle spasms. This is what chiropractors call an acute “**SUBLUXATION**” of the joints in the spine. More subtle cases of this same problem (in the neck or back) are what chiropractors treat in their practice more than any other problem. Next week, I will discuss how a problem like this is best treated and the progress the gentleman has made so far.