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

Recovering After Snow Shoveling

Last week I described how a “Mr. Smith” became acutely sore in his low back after shoveling his driveway. As promised, this week I will tell you what was wrong with him, how it was treated, and how he feels one week later with treatment. To refresh your memory, or if you missed last week’s article, Mr. Smith had been experiencing very mild low back stiffness for about two weeks before the snow fell. This stiffness was not constant and did not interfere with any of his daily activities. He just expected it to “go away” since he was a healthy young guy. In fact, his lower back stiffness seemed to subside when he began to shovel the snow. Unfortunately, he let it snow all day before he began to shovel. That way he would only have to do it once! As well, I asked him to describe his shoveling technique and it proved to be as safe as Gordon Campbell behind the wheel after “only a couple martinis”. Once he had finished shoveling all the snow, he retired directly to his coveted lazy-boy chair with a cold beer in hand. After consuming the beer in true “Campbell” fashion, he fell asleep. However, when he woke up, he found himself unable to even get out of the chair due to severe low back pain and waves of acute muscle spasms.

Now that you have been brought up to speed on what Mr. Smith did prior to the onset of his low back pain, I will explain what exactly he did to his back to cause his suffering. After a full chiropractic examination, it was determined that Mr. Smith had injured the “facet” joints between the bottom two vertebrae in his low back (lumbar spine). The mild stiffness that he had been experiencing over the previous two weeks told me that likely these “facet” joints had an already reduced range of motion or mobility even before he picked up the snow shovel, making them vulnerable to injury. When he came to see me the day after the pain started, the joints in his lower back (lumbar spine) were very tight, stiff, and inflamed. The inflammation irritated the “spinal nerves” as they exited the spine. These nerves are responsible for controlling pain sensation and muscle contraction, resulting in severe pain and muscle spasms. The combination of stiff joints, irritated nerves, inflammation, and muscle spasm is what chiropractors call a “SUBLUXATION”.

With Mr. Smith, we began his treatment on the first day he entered our office. First of all, I completed a “scan” of his back. This included using a “surface electromyogram” (SEMG) to determine how much and where his muscles were in spasm. His results were compared to the muscles activity of normal males his age and a comparison was made between the muscle contraction of his left low back versus his right. The second part of the scan used infrared beams to identify significant imbalances in skin temperature on one side of his spine compared to the other. In very simplistic terms, his spastic and imbalanced muscle activity combined with imbalances in his skin temperature represented problem areas where his spinal nerves were being irritated. The results of Mr. Smith’s scan clearly agreed with my diagnosis that I described above. I instructed him on how to ice the injured area at home (20 minutes at a time, three to four times a day, for three days, with a bag of frozen peas). By following this routine of icing regularly, the inflammation in and around the facet joints was reduced. Over the past week, he received a series of “adjustments” or “manipulation” to the injured facet joints. This restored the normal full range of motion in his previously injured joints. Once this was accomplished, his body was able to “flush out” the inflammation and allow the injured region to commence healing naturally. I then explained to him that he should keep his low back moving so that his joints and muscles do not stiffen up on him all over again.

After one full week of treatment, Mr. Smith is feeling much better. He is able to walk for thirty to forty minutes without pain. He is no longer experiencing uncontrollable muscle spasms that prevented him from even getting off the toilet on his. As well, he is able to sleep at night without being severely tight and stiff in the morning. He will continue to receive “adjustments” or “manipulation” for another two weeks. At that time, he will be re-examined and re-scanned to see how much more treatment he will require. During this time, he will be doing some specific stretches and exercises for his low back. Over a period of time, there should be no reason why he cannot make a full recovery.