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

Adjust Your Car Seat to Avoid Back Problems

Do you find that driving makes your back stiff or even sore? Like many other people, sitting in a vehicle for long periods of time can make you vulnerable for experiencing bouts of low back pain.

Unlike regular sitting, driving causes the body to be subjected to many different forces such as: accelerations and decelerations, swaying from side to side, and to whole body vibrations. These motions, combined with improper low back support and prolonged sitting can increase the chances of you experiencing low back pain. The use of the right foot on the gas and brake, and/or the left foot on the clutch, can also add to the possible strain on your low back. When the feet are active they cannot be used to support and stabilize the lower body as when sitting in a stationary chair.

If you must spend excessive time in a vehicle, try to do it in one that has a good quality seat. You can determine the quality of a car seat by checking to see how adjustable it is. At a minimum you should be able to adjust: the seat distance for leg length, the seat height for leg length, and the backrest angle of the seat to adjust the incline for comfort ability. If your seat has only minimal adjustment options, then you can use a lumbar (low back) support pillow when driving. This allows your low back to conform to the contour of the pillow, helps you sit more snugly in your seat, and helps keep you from slouching while driving.

Now that you have checked your seat, here are a few recommendations:

- 1) You should be able to reach the brake/gas pedals comfortably. If you can't, you will be reaching for them and your posture will be adversely affected. Believe it or not, I have a very "vertically challenged" patient who solved her problem of not being able to reach the pedals by duct taping blocks of 2x4 to each pedal. Do you think the duct tape would hold if she didn't push on the very centre of the pedal?
- 2) If the lower or seat portion of your car seat tilts forward and backward, make sure that it is tilted so that it is not pressed against the back of your knees.

- 3) If the upper part of the seat tips forward and backward, do not have it leaning too far back. You should not feel like you are sitting in a “Lazy-Boy” recliner at City Furniture.
- 4) If your car has lumbar support make sure that it is adjusted to the depth and height of YOUR low back curve. It should not press too hard or be too low or high.
- 5) If your seat has arm rests, your arms should rest comfortably on them. This will help stabilize your low back and take some of the pressure gravity exerts on the lumbar spine as you sit. However, just be sure the armrests are not sitting too high or too low for someone your height.
- 6) Change your posture or position from time to time. Wiggle in your seat, recenter yourself, put it on cruise control. Movement helps alleviate postural fatigue.
- 7) Take breaks - prolonged sitting can cause postural discomfort, leg pain, low back pain, and sometimes even numbness. While stopping at a gas stations or rest area, stretch your back by the gas pump or on a picnic table. Move around at every stop to help pump your muscles and reduce stiffness.

By following this simple advice, you will reduce the amount of stress your low back is exposed to when you drive. To be even more proactive, you should also participate in at least a simple but regular exercise program and visit your chiropractor regularly. If you must drive or sit for excessive periods of time, chiropractic treatment and exercise will increase and maintain your low back mobility and flexibility. This will allow your low back to be better able to handle whatever stress you put it through.

Does This Sound Like Your Back Problem?

There are many different potential causes of pain in the lower back. The two most talked about sources of pain are from within the joints of the spine and a degenerated/herniated disk. Problems in either of these regions could cause an irritation of the nerves and produce a referred pain further down the leg (commonly termed “sciatica”). However, another very common and often misdiagnosed source of pain is the “sacroiliac joint”. It is actually the joint between the “sacrum” and “ileum” bones located at each side of the pelvis and not in the spine at all.

At one point in time, it was thought that this joint did not move at all and was not a source of pain. A recent study has disproved this theory. The researchers in this study

injected “freezing or anesthetic” specifically into this joint in people with low back pain. They used x-rays to be sure the needle was actually inside of the “sacroiliac joint”. Once the anesthetic was given time to take affect, the low back pain was significantly better and then returned when the anesthetic wore off. Although it was never intended to be a cure for their back problem, it clearly demonstrated that the sacroiliac joint should be added to the list of possible causes of acute and chronic low back pain.

In my office, the sacroiliac joint is the most common causes of acute low back. It can occur gradually and in the absence of any heavy lifting or accidents. When sore, you will feel the pain two to three inches to one side from the middle of the low back. It can even occur on both sides at the same time. When the nerve endings located within the sacroiliac joint become irritated by inflammation or direct pressure, you may feel a referred pain that can travel to the hip, groin, and leg (see diagram). As well, strong and painful muscle spasms can accompany the pain in the joint.



Research has also shown that the fastest way for any joint to heal, particularly in the low back and pelvis, is to restore the movement or mobility of the joint. All the joints in your body are designed to nourish themselves, remove swelling, and heal after an injury. But, for this to occur, the joint has to be able to move properly. In cases of low back pain, the joints become very “stiff or jammed”. It is the job of the chiropractor to safely do a series of “adjustments” to restore and maintain this movement, allowing it to heal without the use of medications. As the joint heals and the symptoms lessen, the frequency of the chiropractic adjustments decreases. To prevent a reoccurrence of the same problem, you should begin an exercise and stretching program. As well, you should see your chiropractor regularly to identify and correct any small problems before they become big ones.