

Dr. Colin Gage

Nicola Valley Chiropractic
2076A Granite Ave.
P.O. Box 909
Merritt, BC
V1K 1R8

Ph: (250) 378-5456
Fax: (250) 378-8259
Email: info@merrittchiro.com
Website: www.merrittchiro.com

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

Don't Let Your Back Get out of Whack When Attacking Weeds and Leaves

I did not think that I would be writing an article on this topic so early in the year. However, last week I had a few people in to see me for acute back pain after doing yardwork. Even though the state-of-the-art equipment available today for lawn and leaf management can help turn the average homeowner into a lawn specialist overnight, physical problems still arise. Many people are quite inactive over the winter months, as it is not as convenient to be outside. Then, when the warmer weather starts to show up, they just can't help themselves. Out they go, raking the *entire* lawn, pruning *all* the trees, or digging in the flowerbeds *all day*.

Every year I try to warn people that doing yardwork such as digging, raking, or using equipment (such as weedeaters or rototillers) can result in back and neck pain, as well as more serious muscular strains and tears if they are not used properly. The repetitive motion that your body undergoes when digging, raking or using yard equipment can bring on a whole host of mechanical problems within the body. It is essential to do the work or operate your equipment properly. If you do not, the stress and pounding on your body may be multiplied.

To help prevent yardwork-related problems, I offer the following tips to help you safely enjoy a productive day in the yard:

When using a weedeater, make sure it has a strap and that you use it. Place the strap over your head on the shoulder on the opposite side of your body from the device. This will help normalize your center of gravity.

Be sure to switch the side on which you are using the weedeater as often as possible. To balance the muscles being used, alternate your stance and motion frequently.

Take frequent breaks from whatever activity you are doing that day. Muscle fatigue and even muscle strain may occur when doing any type of yardwork for an extended period of time.

If necessary, consider electric-powered items, especially if you experience back or neck pain, as they tend to be much lighter than their engine-powered counterparts.

When picking up or putting down your tools or other objects, be sure to bend from the knees, not at the waist. Keep the object close to your body as you lift and not at arm's length.

While it is critical that you operate your yard equipment safely, it is equally important that you prepare your body for the work you are about to do. Be sure to include a warm-up/cool-down period that involves stretching to help avoid injury. Before stretching, there are a few tips to keep in mind. Breathe in and out slowly throughout each stretching exercise until the muscle is stretched to its furthest point. At that point, hold your breath in. When you relax, breathe out. Stretch gently and smoothly. Do not bounce or jerk your body in any way and stretch as far as you can comfortably. You should not feel pain.

The following are a few easy stretches I recommend for getting the most out of the time you spend in the yard:

- Stand up and prop your heel on a back door step or stool with your knee slightly bent. Bend forward until you feel a slight pull at the back of the thigh, called the hamstring. You may need to stabilize yourself by holding onto a garage door handle or sturdy tree branch. Hold the position for 20 seconds, then relax. Do it once more, then repeat with the other leg.

- Stand up and put your right hand against a wall or other stable surface. Bend your left knee and grab your ankle with your left hand. Pull your heel toward your buttocks to stretch the quadricep muscle at the front of your thigh. Hold that position for 20 seconds, relax and do it again. Repeat with the other leg.
- Weave your fingers together above your head with your palms up. Lean to one side for 10 seconds to stretch the side of your upper body, then reverse. Repeat two or three times.
- Wrap your arms around yourself after letting your breath out and rotate to one side, as far as you can go. Hold it for 10 seconds. Then reverse. Repeat two or three times.

On a preventative note, it is beneficial to see your chiropractor for an assessment and potential “tune up” prior to commencing any physical activity. With chiropractic treatment, the mobility of your joints and flexibility of your muscles will be at their best. This will allow your body to handle the physical stress you are about to put it through. However, if you do experience pain or discomfort resulting from tackling your seasonal yardwork, call your doctor of chiropractic. Doctors of chiropractic are trained and licensed to treat the entire neuromusculoskeletal system, and can help you lead a healthier life by focusing on correcting your actual problem and not just the symptoms.