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

Low Back Pain

In the general population, two-thirds of adults will experience low back pain at some point in their life, even athletes are no exception. Few things are as annoying or distracting to athletes or "regular" people as low back pain. Depending upon severity it can really put a dent in your typical lifestyle, even competitive training plans. The exact source of back pain may be due to mechanical problems in the spine, which account for 97% of cases, or potentially more serious conditions such as infections, tumors, inflammatory arthritis, or internal organ disease. These latter problems are beyond the scope of this article.

By far the most common diagnosis in patients with low back pain is the lumbar sprain/strain, which accounts for about 75% of all cases of low back pain. Other mechanical causes of low back pain are age-related degenerative changes in the discs and joints in the spine, spinal stenosis, and disc herniation.

What exactly is a lumbar sprain? The real answer is that no one really knows for absolute certainty (yes, you read that correctly). There is no test to 100% accurately diagnose a lumbar sprain, because there is no anatomical or pathological abnormality that can be reliably "felt" or "visualized" easily in patients with "lumbar sprains". What about MRI scans, don't these high-resolution images show exactly what's going on? Surprisingly, x-rays and MRI scans are not only unnecessary for most patients with low back pain, but may also be misleading and confusing. This is because two-thirds of healthy volunteers *without* back pain have abnormalities on x-ray and MRI. Thus, finding an abnormality with even a MRI is very common and often has nothing to do with the actual back pain you might be feeling. For most patients with low back pain, X-ray, MRI, and other imaging studies are just not needed. However, it is important to note that there are certain warning signs and symptoms, and other circumstances, that may indicate a more significant problem that would necessitate further evaluation. These include bladder or bowel dysfunction, muscle weakness or numbness in the legs, sciatica (pain down the back of one or both legs), persistent or prolonged pain (e.g., weeks), weight loss, and fever. The bottom line is, consult your chiropractor right away regardless.

During the acute phase of a lumbar sprain there are a few useful things to keep in mind. With respect to activity, do what you feel you are capable of. Neither absolute bed rest nor aggressive back exercise regimens are helpful. The patients that do the best are the ones who see their chiropractor, listen to their body, and strive for a rapid return to usual activities. Non-steroidal antiinflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, can help with pain and mobility in the short-term only (long term use is not good for you!). Finally, keep in mind that although the first few days are the worst, recovery is usually rapid (approx. 90% of patients are well within two weeks) if it is treated quickly.

Completely addressing a lumbar sprain/strain in anyone involves the identification of factors that lead to the problem, and proper chiropractic treatment. Rehabilitation and prevention of a lumbar sprain/strain should address core muscle weakness, lack of exercise, repetitive bending/motions at work or home, joint immobility, and muscle inflexibility. Proper muscle and joint function through chiropractic care and regular exercise can help prevent the problem from returning. Ideally, back strengthening and stability exercises should be a routine part of anyone's exercise regiment if he or she has had recurrent low back problems.

In summary, seek qualified chiropractic care for back pain. If you are one of the many that fall into the category of "lumbar strain", look at all of your day-to-day activities, even your workout schedule, for potential causes. Look for

any contributing factors and fix them. Finally, keep your back in good shape through proper posture, preventative chiropractic care, and strengthening exercises -- even if you have never had back pain!