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

Experiencing Pain in the Upper Back?

Do you have “sharp or catching” pain in your upper back between the shoulder blades? Is it localized to only one side of the spine? Does taking a deep breath, coughing, or sneezing make it worse? If you can answer yes to one or more of these questions, you may have a quite common but often misdiagnosed problem that could be treated conservatively.

In your spine, there are seven vertebrae in your neck, twelve in your upper back, and five in your lower back. Attaching to the middle twelve vertebrae are your twelve pairs of ribs. There are small joints and ligaments that attach each of the ribs to the side of the spine. When you take a deep breath in, the joints between the ribs and the spine, called “costovertebral” joints, move. Many of the muscles in your upper back attach to the ribs. When these muscles contract forcefully, excessive pressure can be put on the ribs and their costovertebral joints. If one or more of the costovertebral joints becomes a problem, you will feel a sharp pain in the upper back between one shoulder blade and the spine. You may find that lying on the sore side aggravates the pain and lying on the good side relieves it slightly. You will likely feel a sharp increase in pain during a deep breath, coughing, or sneezing. The pain may travel from your upper back around to the side of the chest, almost mimicking angina or severe indigestion. If you feel this type of symptoms, see your medical doctor immediately to first rule out a heart condition. If your problem is due to a painful costovertebral joint and it is not treated by a chiropractor right away, other areas of the body soon become affected. Eventually, the muscles of the upper back, shoulder, and neck on the same side will go into severe spasm, which will inevitably restrict the movement of your neck and potentially cause dull achy headaches.

Costovertebral joint problems commonly arise when someone is doing an awkward activity or maintaining an improper posture for a prolonged period of time. Recently, I had two perfect examples in my office of people who had this exact problem:

The first was a gentleman who had recent knee surgery and was using crutches to walk. When on the crutches, he was using his shoulders and upper back muscles to hold all his weight as he took each step. With each forceful contraction of the muscles, he repetitively pulled on each rib and the associated costovertebral joint.

The second example was a young female who has a nasty habit of carrying her thirty-pound child on her hip supported by her left arm only. This made the muscles of her upper back and shoulders contract hard and for long periods of time, which pulled on the ribs and their associated costovertebral joints.

Interestingly enough, the costovertebral joints in both these people became “jammed”, or their movement was “restricted”. Each of these joints became very inflamed or swollen and by the time I was able to examine them, they were quite sore to touch. With every deep breath, sneeze, or twist of their back, they experienced acute pain on one side of their upper back. As I expected, both of these people had acutely painful spasms of the neck and shoulder muscles on the injured side.

Chiropractors are specifically trained to address joint and muscle problems such as this. By doing “adjustments” or gentle “manipulation”, the movement or mobility of the joints can be restored. Through the use of electrical therapy, stretching exercises, and other soft tissue therapies, the muscle spasm can be reduced. If the joint is able to keep mobile and the muscle spasms are kept to a minimum, your body can deal with the injured area. However, to prevent the problem from reoccurring, you and your chiropractor must identify what it is you are doing to put the pressure on the costovertebral joints in the first place. This takes us back to the statement that our office operates by: “treat the cause of your problem, not just your symptoms”.