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

Be Careful When Raking Leaves

As you look out your window from that comfortable couch, you see your yard taking on a new look. A blanket of leaves and pine needles is gradually forming. Grudgingly, on your next Sunday afternoon, you will be out there raking them up.

It is very surprising how many people end up calling my office early the following Monday morning because of the acute low back pain they have earned while raking. This is usually due to raking in the incorrect posture and for too long at one time. The weight of the leaves or needles is not the problem. The most common cause of the low back pain is the repetitive twisting motion that many people do as they pull the rake towards themselves. Our back is not designed to handle repetitive twisting motions, especially if lifting is involved.

The pain doesn't usually become severe while you are raking. It often comes on during the night when your back is no longer moving. During this time, the inflammation or swelling accumulates and the joints stiffen. The nerves exiting between the vertebrae are positioned very close to the swollen joints. These nerves can become "pinched" or "irritated". This leads to acute muscle spasm and pain that may or may not travel down to the leg or buttocks.

The best treatment for this condition is to restore normal movement of the area and keep it that way long enough for it to heal. Chiropractors receive good results in my office by doing "adjustments" or "manipulation" of the effected joints to restore their mobility. By having good mobility in the swollen and sore joints, the swelling can be flushed out, the circulation inside the joint is improved, and the joints heal much faster with less pain. It is important that people understand that only your body will heal the injury and that the chiropractor is just making that system work more efficiently and at a faster rate. Applying ice packs or even frozen peas for ten to fifteen minutes at a time, two to three times per day, will help decrease the swelling around the nerves and joints. In the unfortunate event that something more serious has occurred, such as a herniated disk, the chiropractor is trained to identify and conservatively treat it. If conservative therapy will not work, the appropriate referral to a specialist can be made. This is usually done in conjunction with your medical doctor.

Of course, the best cure for low back pain is prevention. When you are raking, keep your back straight and pull the rake directly towards your body. Do not pull the rake to your side, as this will automatically encourage your back to twist. It is also important to not try to rake the entire yard in one day. Spread the job out over a few days. Some may laugh at this, but it is recommended that you actually warm up and stretch before starting to rake. Go for a light ten-minute walk and do a few repetitions of stretching for the low back before starting. You can refer to our website (www.merrittchiro.com) for free low back stretches and exercises.