

BACK PAIN -- PART I

What Can You Do?

It is a known fact that at one time or another almost everyone will experience low back pain. The National Center for Health Statistics states that back pain is the most common reason people miss work and the most frequent complaint brought to medical attention. It carries with it great human and social costs. General well-being, both mental and physical are affected. On the average, it is considered one of the most expensive diseases as to personal financial costs and the staggering economic costs to society.

Back pain afflicts the young and middle-aged as well as the old. It attacks men and women in all walks of life. It even attacks the young, vigorous and physically fit athlete. Why? The cause of the majority of low back ailments is mechanical. Mechanical problems arise when there is improper postural alignment. This is due to the weakness of certain muscles while other muscles and ligaments are in a tightened or shortened state. How does this happen? We develop poor posture habits in our daily life when standing, working, sitting or even sleeping. Other causes are lack of exercise, being overweight, and physical and mental stresses such as tension, fatigue, anxiety and depression.

How can you prevent recurring back pain? It is recommended to get a back evaluation by a physical therapist who can set up an individualized program of flexibility and strengthening exercises or will help you with your postural problems that occur in daily life both at work and at home.

However, for some generalized guidelines, we have supplied you with a few posture tips and lifting techniques.

PROPER LIFTING TECHNIQUES

Few back injuries occur because of a person's failure to squat down to pick up a heavy load. Experience suggests that 90-100% of these people know well enough to "lift with their legs" when picking up an object. However, many were not aware of the many other basic lifting techniques.

A majority of the injuries seen would not have occurred if people had known and adhered to the following principles:

WHEN LIFTING ALWAYS--

- 1 Follow the object. Do not twist your body.
- 2 Tense your abdominal muscles firmly throughout the lift.
- 3 Hold the object close to your body. If you can't apply the force close, don't lift it.
- 4 Lift with legs.
- 5 Lift heavier objects no higher than your waist.
- 6 To turn with an object in hand, pivot on your feet, turning your whole body at one time.
- 7 Avoid repetitive lifting for long periods of time without rest breaks or changes in activity.
- 8 Remember that these principles should be adhered to when lifting an object up and setting an object down.

WHAT CAN A PHYSICAL THERAPIST DO?

A physical therapist can assist a client in relieving annoying and often debilitating back pain. A physical therapist is a teacher of posture training, instructor in proper lifting techniques and strengthening and flexibility exercises.

Other treatments include modalities such as moist heat, whirlpool, ultrasound, diathermy, electrical stimulation, transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation, intermittent lumbar traction, and techniques such as massage, soft tissue mobilization and spinal manipulation.

POSTURE TIPS

Poor posture is frequently a major contributing factor to low back pain. To help protect your back and give it the support it needs, follow these proper posture guidelines:

- 1 Stand tall with the head up, chin in and back with a normal, mild lumbar curve.
- 2 Avoid slouching in both standing and sitting.
- 3 Don't sit for long periods.
- 4 When driving, move the car seat closer to the steering wheel to keep the knees at waist level and the back supported
- 5 If standing for long periods, put one foot up on a small stool to relieve stress on the back.
- 6 Always bend at the knees and keep the back straight when lifting.
- 7 Sleep on your side with the knees bent or on your back with one or two pillows under the knees.
- 8 Remember posture is an attitude, a statement about yourself.

Be aware of good posture at all times. You'll look better and your back will thank you for it!

Contributors:

Karen Ellefson, PT
Michael Edwards, PT
Jean Amoroso, PT